

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN MESSAGE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
HIDDEN MESSAGE**

Dr Arroway, an archaeologist and cultural historian who specializes in ancient Maya culture, purchases an historical sacred book. When the book is surprisingly stolen, it is clear that someone else is also interested in it. Dr Arroway engages The Three Investigators to track down the thief. Along the way, the three detectives discover more about the book. What is so valuable about it? Does it contain some sort of a hidden message?

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Hidden Message

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(The Three ???: Message from a Ghostly Hand)

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1. The Dead Man in the Desert

“He was murdered.”

Jupiter smiled mysteriously and shook his head. “That wasn’t a question, that was a statement.”

“He wasn’t murdered?”

Jupiter gave a nod.

“But that doesn’t make sense! No one would voluntarily strip naked in the desert! Someone must have killed him and stolen his clothes.”

Pete waited for a reaction, but Jupiter just said: “That was not a question.”

The Second Investigator rolled his eyes. “All right. Did someone steal his stuff?”

“No.”

“Did the dead man undress willingly?”

“Yes.”

Pete shook his head in confusion. “This is absurd.”

“Not necessarily,” Jupiter said. “There are situations where it makes sense to get rid of your clothes in the desert.”

“I can’t think of any.” Puzzled, Pete propped his chin up on his hand and looked around Headquarters as if the answer to the riddle was hidden there.

Headquarters was the office of Jupiter, Pete and Bob—The Three Investigators. But an outsider would never have recognized it as such, because it was set up inside an old mobile home trailer that stood in Jupiter’s uncle Titus’s salvage yard. But the dilapidated impression the trailer made at first glance was a bit of a drawback because Headquarters was furnished in an ultra-modern way.

In the course of time, The Three Investigators had gathered everything a real detective agency needed—starting with a crime lab in the back of the trailer, a telephone line and a fully equipped computer system. Here is where many cases of The Three Investigators had started. Here is also where they had argued and debated on issues. And here is where they had celebrated the happy ending of many adventures.

And now the Second Investigator, Pete Crenshaw, was to solve a mystery all by himself. No, according to Jupiter it was not a murder, nor an accident, but there was a naked man lying dead in the desert and Pete had to find out what had happened.

His eyes fell on the refrigerator. "Did he die of thirst?"

"No."

"Was he poisoned?"

"I told you before, it wasn't murder."

"He was not murdered, nor did he die of thirst. You're pulling my leg, Juve! How else can you die in the desert?"

"That's what I want you to find out."

The door to Headquarters opened and Bob Andrews entered. "Who died in the desert?"

"Hi, Bob," Juve said. "A man. A naked man. A naked man with a piece of wood in his hand. That's all I can tell you."

Bob frowned. "Did I miss anything? Do we have a new assignment?"

"Not really. Just practising," Juve replied. "I thought it wouldn't hurt Pete to practise a little logical thinking and deduction, two skills he's always been keen to neglect."

Pete threw a poisonous glance at Jupiter, but the First Investigator continued unperturbed: "Since we don't have a case in progress at the moment and therefore lack criminological challenges, I have decided to create a fictitious case."

"What Juve is trying to say with his fancy talk is that he has given me a situation and I am supposed to find out what happened: 'A man is lying dead in the desert, naked and holding a piece of wood in his hand. Why?' I may ask Juve questions, but he only answers with 'yes' or 'no'. It's a game, nothing more."

"An exercise," the First Investigator insisted.

"Sounds exciting," Bob found and sat with them. "So? Have you found out anything yet?"

"He was not murdered and did not die of thirst. And his clothes were not stolen from him. That is all," Pete summarized.

"That's not many clues," Bob remarked. "Could it have been an accident?"

Jupiter shook his head.

"Not an accident? How is that possible? How else can you die?" Bob asked.

“Ah, I’ve got it!” cried Pete. “Was the man sick?”

“No. He was in perfect health.” Jupiter smiled.

“Come on, Jupe, just tell us the solution,” Pete begged.

“Tell you the solution?” Jupe snapped. “You haven’t even scratched the surface of the puzzle!”

“Suicide!” cried Bob. “It was suicide!”

The First Investigator pulled a face. “Actually, yes. But not in the usual sense.”

“Not in the usual sense?” Bob asked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The man may have caused his own death, but he didn’t want to die.”

“Hey, you didn’t answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’!” cried Bob.

“True. And that’s why there are no more tips now. You’ll have to figure out the rest yourself.”

“Mean,” Pete thought.

“Let’s leave the cause of death aside for now,” Bob suggested.

“Maybe we’ll come up with something else. Did that man get out in the desert?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Did he wander into the desert?”

“No.”

“Was he in danger?”

“No.”

“Did he ride on something?”

“No.”

“Flew?”

“Yes.”

“His plane crashed,” Pete was convinced.

“No.”

“Then he landed, sand got in the gearbox, he couldn’t take off and died of thirst.”

“He didn’t die of thirst, remember?” Jupe reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.”

Bob scratched his head. “Is the plane still around?”

“No.”

“Has it flown away?”

“No.”

Pete cut. “You’ve got to be kidding, Jupe! Either it’s in the desert or it’s flown on, there’s no other way.”

“Yes, there is. You think too straight. You must be more imaginative! For example, what makes you think the man came into the desert in an airplane?”

“Because you just said so!”

“No. You asked whether he flew and I said yes. There was never any question of a plane.”

Pete sighed. “So it wasn’t a plane at all?”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“You’re supposed to tell me.” Jupiter looked out the window and stood up. “Keep racking your brains, I’m going out for a while. The postman just arrived. I want to see if there’s anything for us.”

Jupiter left Headquarters and stepped out onto the dusty salvage yard, which was crowded that Saturday morning. Aunt Mathilda was just taking the letters.

“Hello Jupe! I’m surprised that you dare to come out of your trailer,” cried Aunt Mathilda and winked at him as he approached. “After all, I might as well put you and your friends to work right away.”

“You would do that anyway,” replied Jupiter in a good-natured manner. “Whether we hide out at Headquarters or not, if there’s work to be done here, we can’t escape you.”

“True. But since you promised to cover for me here next week when I go to the doctor’s, you get a day off... or let’s say a morning off.”

“How kind of you. Has any mail come for me?”

Aunt Mathilda leafed through the envelopes. “Bills, advertisements, bills, advertisements. Everyone just wants our money. Couldn’t you win the lottery for a change?”

“You’d have to play the lottery.”

“Here’s a letter for you.”

Jupiter got a plain white envelope that said: ‘To The Three Investigators’. The address was on a sticker printed on a computer. There was no sender. But on the back there was a little handwritten note that said: ‘If you really are detectives, you can solve this mystery.’

The First Investigator hurried back to Headquarters.

“Did he fly in a rocket?” he was mobbed by Pete as soon as he opened the door.

“No.”

“With a sailing kite?”

“No.”

“With a parachute?”

“No.”

“With a balloon?”

“Yes.”

“Aha!”

“For you or for us?” Bob asked when he saw the envelope in Jupiter’s hand.

“For us. No return address.” The First Investigator reached for a pair of scissors and opened the letter.

“Did he fly the balloon by himself?”

“No.”

“Did the other guy push him out of the basket?”

“No. Could we pause the guessing for a moment? Who knows, you may have to prove your deductive reasoning skills on a real case soon.” Jupiter pulled a note from the envelope and unfolded it. He turned it over. Both sides were empty.

“What?”

“There’s nothing written on the paper.”

Bob took the letter from Juve. It was a blank white piece of paper.

“Is there anything else in the envelope?”

“No. But look!”

“If you really are detectives, you can solve this mystery,” Bob read. “Probably written by a woman.”

“What makes you think of that?” Juve asked.

“Well, haven’t you ever noticed that women write differently from men?” Bob said. “This is typical female handwriting.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” warned Jupiter. “One can also adjust his writing style.”

“What’s the point,” Pete asked and held the note inconclusively against the light, but without seeing anything. “Who is sending us a blank piece of paper?”

“I guess that’s what we’re supposed to find out,” said Jupiter. “Somebody’s trying to test us. Someone who thinks we need to prove our abilities first.”

“Or that we are failures as detectives,” Pete added.

“We? Failures?” Bob laughed. “How could anyone say that when we’ve solved every case so far.”

“Who knows, maybe this is the first case we can’t solve,” Pete replied pessimistically. “In any case, I don’t know what to do with a white piece of paper. Where should the mystery be?”

“That’s the mystery,” Bob said. “Maybe there’s something with secret ink written on it and our job is to make the writing visible again.”

“Good idea, Bob. But for me, the main mystery is another—‘Who sent us this letter?’”

2. The Invisible Message

Chaos had broken out in the tiny laboratory of The Three Investigators. Jupiter, Pete and Bob stood around the table where the mysterious letter was lying.

There were bottles and jars everywhere, containing all kinds of tinctures and powders. Next to it was a Bunsen burner and a test tube holder. It smelled of chemicals. They had heated the paper, but it had remained as white as a handkerchief. After that, everything they could find in their crime lab had been drizzled over the invisible message—from simple lemon juice to hydrogen peroxide. Jupiter had started to mix some substances, dissolve powders in water or alcohol, or wave a few liquids over the flame of the Bunsen burner until they changed colour. But all this had done nothing—apart from the fact that the paper now had some stains and had become wavy.

“I’m afraid we have ruined the paper,” sighed Pete. “Even if there was a secret script on it, by now it’s guaranteed to be etched away by all our acids and alkalis and powders.”

“I don’t believe it,” cried Jupiter angrily and held the sheet against the light again, as if he hoped to recognize something after all. “There must be something here! Why can’t we make the writing visible?”

“Maybe that’s because there’s none on it,” Bob suggested. “What if we were wrong and the mysterious phrase on the envelope meant something else entirely?”

“What?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “Perhaps the white sheet is a metaphor for the mystery.”

“Metaphor?” Pete repeated, hoping Bob would explain the unknown word to him.

“Well, figuratively speaking. Nothing has been written on the paper. Perhaps the paper itself is the mystery, or representative of the mystery,” Bob surmised. He then looked into uncomprehending faces. “Somehow,” he added half-heartedly. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Who knows, maybe the sender made a mistake and posted us the wrong piece of paper,” Pete suggested. “The real puzzle is still on the sender’s desk somewhere.”

“You don’t believe that yourself,” replied Jupiter reproachfully and coated a halfway undamaged part of the paper with iodine.

Silently they waited for a while, but no invisible substance reacted with the liquid, no writing mysteriously appeared on the paper, only the brown iodine stain slowly spread. Jupiter pinched his lower lip.

“Did the man enter the balloon voluntarily?” Pete broke the silence after a while.

“Huh?” Jupiter was interrupted from his thoughts.

“The dead man in the desert—did he voluntarily fly the balloon?”

“Yes,” replied Jupiter. “He did.”

“To kill himself?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” Pete mumbled and fell silent again.

Listlessly Jupiter made a few more attempts with the paper, but all failed. Finally, Aunt Mathilda called him for lunch.

“It’s so late,” Bob muttered. “My parents are probably waiting for me, too.”

“Meet back here later?” Juve asked.

“Sure,” Pete replied. “And by then, I hope you’ll have solved the puzzle.”

“Why me?”

“If you want to maintain your reputation as California’s greatest mastermind, you’ll have to do quite a bit for it,” Pete teased.

“First you solve your puzzle,” Jupiter insisted. “The dead man in the desert. Let’s see who’s faster.”

“Okay!” Pete cried.

When The Three Investigators met again at Headquarters in the afternoon, both Pete and Jupiter made a sad face.

“Nothing,” growled the First Investigator. “Meanwhile I’ve ruined the envelope too, but to no avail.” He held up the stained evidence.

“So much for the greatest mastermind in California,” Bob muttered.

“Comfort yourself,” Pete said conciliatorily. “I couldn’t take away his mastermind title. Were the dead man and his passenger friends?”

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Jupiter tonelessly.

At that moment, the phone rang. The First Investigator switched on the loudspeaker and picked up the receiver. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“I knew it!” an outraged female voice came out of the loudspeaker. “You’re sitting around lazily at your headquarters instead of calling me.”

“Uh—who is it?” Jupe asked.

“Jelena!” cried Bob, who recognized the voice immediately.

“Exactly. You’d probably already banished me from your memory, hadn’t you, Jupiter?”

“How could I,” Jupiter replied slightly annoyed.

“Let me guess—you’ve been desperately trying all morning to solve the mystery of that ominous letter, haven’t you?”

“The letter came from you?”

“Yes. And unfortunately you failed the test, or you would have come to me long ago. Well, save your breath, because I need real detectives,” Jelena cried.

“Wait a minute,” Jupiter intervened. “We are real detectives. And you know this well, after all you were involved in one of our cases.”

Jelena laughed. “Oh no! Back then I did all the work alone! You were just my henchmen.”

“Henchmen? Unbelievable!”

Bob and Pete gave each other meaningful looks. It was not easy to upset Jupiter but Jelena managed this feat within seconds. She was the only person whose arrogance sometimes surpassed that of Jupiter.

“All right,” Jelena gave in. “You’ve failed, but I’ll give you one more chance. Get on your bikes and come here because I have a case for you.”

“Why don’t you solve it yourself, if you’re so brilliant?” Jupiter snapped back.

“I want to give you an opportunity to redeem your professional honour,” Jelena quipped. “See you soon!”

Even before the First Investigator could reply, Jelena had hung up.

Jupiter stared angrily at the receiver, then slammed it down and reached for the smudged letter.

“Oh, oh,” Pete said ominously.

“What?” Jupiter growled angrily.

“I know exactly what’s going on in your head,” Pete said.

“Which is?”

“You’re too eager to know the answer to the puzzle. But you’re far too proud to ask Jelena about it, aren’t you? I do not understand why you do not like her. I think she’s very nice.”

“Nice?” said Jupiter scornfully.

“She’s too much like him,” Bob sneered. “That’s why Jupiter hates her.”

“I don’t hate her. I just find her excessively arrogant,” Jupiter explained. “And we’re nothing alike at all, okay?”

The two smiled at each other and Bob said, “Whatever you say, O’ humble leader.”

The Three Investigators had met Jelena Charkova, the daughter of Russian music professor Sergei Charkov, during a previous investigation. While Bob and Pete had liked the violin-playing girl with the dark blonde hair from the start, Jupiter had had to listen to her endless accusations of him and his colleagues. Eventually, Jupiter had decided to cope with her antics until the case was over.

Pete had even once claimed that Jelena was unpleasant to the First Investigator because she was in a wheelchair. That was of course complete nonsense. Her disability did not concern him. But bothered Jupiter a lot was her know-it-all manner and her habit of never letting him finish saying something! With mixed feelings, he sat on the back seat of Pete’s MG and looked out at the coastal road towards Santa Monica.

In fact, Jupiter had no desire at all to have Jelena constantly point out his alleged shortcomings as a detective. However, he was incredibly curious about the case at hand. After all, Jelena had no intention of keeping The Three Investigators in the dark. It was very clear to Jupiter that she needed their help. But she had been devious enough to work them up with her mysterious letter. Now as they did not manage to figure out her paper mystery, perhaps she could condescend to let them in on her secret. Jupiter Jones knew very well why he did not like Jelena Charkova.

After about twenty minutes of driving, they reached the mansion on Hillview Drive just outside Rocky Beach. The house of the Charkovs was a magnificent white building in the middle of a large plot of land covered with oak trees. As they got out of the car, violin sounds emanated from an open window.

“Oh no, there’s that sound of the fiddle again,” Jupiter moaned.

“I think she plays beautifully,” Pete replied.

“Oh, yeah? I bet she was waiting for us at the window and only now she’s unwrapped her violin to impress us,” Jupiter remarked.

“Nonsense,” Bob objected, and walked up the wide steps to the entrance. “She practises every day. She wants to be a concert violinist.” He rang the bell. The music stopped and after a while the door was opened.

“There you are at last,” said Jelena and took a look around. She smiled at Bob, with Pete she remained neutral and Jupiter was ignored.

“Hello Jelena,” Bob greeted her kindly.

She looked at the clock. “Actually, you could have been here two hours ago if you had decoded my message. But come in first.”

“So the letter came from you,” Pete said as they walked through the large music hall to the corridor leading into Jelena’s room. “What is the solution to this mystery?”

“Did you bring it? Then I’ll show you!”

“Here it is,” Bob said, pulling the stained note from his pocket. Jelena looked at it, laid it on her lap, pushed the door to her room and rode through in her wheelchair.

Jelena’s room, which The Three Investigators had only known to be very tidy, was in chaos. On her desk were test tubes, Petri dishes and other utensils that they knew from chemistry lessons and from their crime lab, which at the moment resembled Jelena’s room in an amazing way. Here, too, there was a slightly acrid smell in the air.

“What’s going on here?” Bob asked in surprise.

“Chemistry,” Jelena replied cool. “My latest hobby. A fascinating science! And this is my latest invention. She took a pen from her desk and held it up.”

“A felt-tip pen,” remarked Jupiter dismissively. “Very impressive, indeed. It’s just a pity that this invention was made a hundred years ago.”

Jelena ignored the remark, grabbed a blank piece of paper and wrote something on it. But the felt-tip pen did not make any marks on the paper. She pressed the paper into Jupiter’s hand and said: “Here you go!”

The First Investigator looked at it for a moment. “I suppose the writing appears when I draw over it with another pen. What’s so special about it?”

“That it just doesn’t work with any pen. This secret ink is difficult to detect unless you know its composition. You were my test subjects. And as you can see, you ruined my letter, but you still couldn’t make the secret ink visible. It can only be done with this revealing pen.” She pulled a second felt pen out of her pocket and handed it to the First Investigator.

“It’s a sure-fire way to send secret messages. I always carry the invisible ink pen with me in case of emergency. You’ll never know.”

The First Investigator laughed spitefully. “For emergencies! All right, Jelena. I’m sure you’ll need it often!” Then he used the second pen to hatch over the white area. Almost instantly the message stood out: ‘Jupiter is stupid’.

“Very funny.” He picked up the original letter and tried the marker again. This time the following message appeared:

*Congratulations! You’re better than I thought.
Ready for the next puzzle? Then come see me this afternoon at three!
A new adventure calls!*

Jelena

“Very well,” Jupiter said tonelessly. “You have invented a sensational secret ink. We are all very impressed. But that’s not why you called us here, I hope.”

Jelena nodded. “That’s right. The real reason is that I need your help to prevent a crime.”

“A crime? What is it? Murder? Manslaughter? Bank robbery?” Pete asked.

Jelena shook her head. “Tomorrow night a significant cultural treasure will be stolen if we don’t stop it.”

3. The Sacred Book

“What are you talking about?” asked the Second Investigator astonished. “Stolen? What is it? By whom? How do you know that?”

Even before Jelena could answer, Jupiter waved away. “Forget it, fellas. Miss Charkov is pulling our leg.”

“Charkova,” Jelena reminded him angrily. “You think you’re so smart. In Russian, women’s surnames are always followed by an ‘a’. Anyway, I’m not kidding you, it’s really true. Someone wants to steal something very valuable tomorrow.”

“And what is that thing?” Jupiter asked, bored.

“Ever heard of the *Popol Vuh*?”

Pete frowned. “Huh? *Popol* what?”

“*Popol Vuh*,” Bob said. “Sounds familiar. Isn’t that an old historical book from Central America?”

Jupiter nodded. “One of the few surviving Maya scriptures. The vast majority of Maya tribes never had a written language. Only the Maya civilizations of Central America developed their own script. However, most of the records were lost during the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. The *Popol Vuh* is the historical sacred book of the K’iche’ people—one of the Maya peoples from Guatemala. As far as I know, the oldest copy is in some museum. And that’s supposed to be stolen tomorrow?”

Jelena shook her head. “Not the original. There were many translations of the book, but this one I am talking about is a translation by a 16th century Spanish priest, Bernardino de Valencia. I’ve been looking into it.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Pete interrupted and raised his hands defensively. “I don’t understand a thing. What is this sacred book?”

“The *Popol Vuh* was first translated into Spanish more than four hundred years ago,” explained the First Investigator and continued, addressing Jelena: “And you don’t have to find out about it first, it’s part of general education.”

“For you, perhaps,” Pete said. “I’ve never heard of that book.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jupe remarked.

“Although the original is exhibited in a museum, the translation is not,” continued Jelena. “It has always been in private hands. And as luck would have it, it was sold at an auction in Los Angeles a few weeks ago—for twenty-five thousand dollars to an archaeologist and cultural historian by the name of Dr Arroway, a resident of Rocky Beach.”

“Well, what a coincidence,” said Bob. “How do you know all this?”

“I’ve done some checks. You think only detectives can do that? All it takes is a phone and a little patience and you can find out anything you want to know.”

“And the *Popol Vuh* would be stolen tomorrow,” Jupiter came back to the point.

“Exactly.”

“By whom?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“What do you mean? You must have the information from someone,” Jupiter said bitingly.

“I got it from the thieves themselves,” Jelena said. “But they know nothing about it.”

“You speak in riddles,” Jupe quipped.

“Look, I’ll tell you from the beginning. Our phone’s been acting up for a few weeks now. Conversations are interrupted in the middle of it. Often I can still hear the other party, but they can’t hear me and so on. I don’t know what’s wrong with the phone. My father is at the conservatory all day, so I took care of it and kept calling the phone company. After endless back and forth, the phone company finally promised to do something but they had to shut down the line completely for a few hours. That was yesterday. I was curious and tried to see if the line was really dead—and suddenly, I was in the middle of a strange conversation. That means it wasn’t a real conversation, I could only hear one party.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete interrupted. “You mean you’ve been switched to another line?”

“I don’t know exactly what happened there. Anyway, I suddenly was on someone else’s line where I had no business being there. But he couldn’t hear me. I shouted ‘hello’ a few times, but there was no reaction.”

“So you were eavesdropping on the conversation,” Jupiter surmised.

“I was listening,” she corrected. “Eavesdropping is such a negatively-charged word. It was a man. He was talking about the *Popol Vuh* and about the translation by Bernardino de Valencia.”

“That he wants to steal it?” Jupiter asked.

“More or less.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said that the deal would be the night after tomorrow—that is, tomorrow night—he would finally have the money after the book had been snatched from under his nose once before,” Jelena said.

“Is that all?” Jupiter asked mockingly. “That could mean anything.”

“I think it sounds pretty clear,” Jelena contradicted.

“Just because you want it to be clear,” claimed Jupiter. “You are desperate to see a crime where probably none exists. It could be, for example, that it is about a reprint of the *Popol Vuh*, the last copy of which was bought by another customer in a book store in front of the unknown caller because at the time, he had no money to buy it.”

Jelena frowned. “So what’s the deal tomorrow night?”

“Maybe just a call between two buddies. After all, you only could hear one party speaking. It could well be that the conversation was about something very different. Your overexcited imagination thrown these two pieces of information together and you concluded that someone wants to steal the twenty-five thousand dollar *Popol Vuh*, even though there is not the slightest...”

“Give me a break!” Jelena interrupted him angrily. “I’m not a complete idiot! I know what I heard, and this phone call was certainly not between two buddies. Besides, the man was calling the other person ‘Sir’ all the time—hardly a buddy. I’m sure there was a planned theft behind it. If you heard the conversation, you’d agree with me.”

“Jupiter and Jelena agree—that would be something new,” Pete smirked and immediately received angry looks from both.

“Listen, Jupiter,” Jelena tried in a conciliatory tone. “I certainly wouldn’t have contacted you if I had doubts, just to save me the eternal wrangling with you.”

“If you are so sure and have already done half the checks yourself, why do you still need us?” Jupiter asked. “Solve the case yourself!”

“I’d like to. But I’m not very mobile with this damn thing.” She slapped the armrests of her wheelchair furiously. “I’m a very independent person, but sometimes I need help. I’m in bad shape if I have to chase someone, if I have to move through houses without ramps and elevators or sneak up on them somewhere. I don’t like that, but that’s the way it is. That’s why I sent you the letter.”

Jupiter remained silent in dismay. He could no longer come up with any sharp remarks.

“All right,” Bob wanted to save the situation. “Enough of this petty fighting. Jelena came across something very interesting. And I think we should go after this case. This could be the beginning of an exciting case, else if it turns out that Jelena is wrong, then the matter will be settled very quickly. What do you think?”

“I may never have heard of this *Popol Vuh*, but I’m in,” Pete said enterprisingly.

“All right,” nodded Jupiter.

For a brief, uncomfortable moment, silence spread, but then Jelena asked in a slightly sarcastic tone: “How do experienced detectives proceed in such a case?”

“Dr Arroway,” replied Jupiter. “He has purchased the *Popol Vuh* at an auction. We should pay him a visit—”

“And find out how well the book is protected,” Jelena finished the thought. “That’s exactly what was going through my mind.” She smiled. “Who knows, maybe I wouldn’t need you after all.”

“What about the police?” Pete asked. “We could tell Inspector Cotta... or do you plan to catch the burglars yourself tomorrow?”

Jupe shook his head. “It has not yet been proven that there will be a theft at all. If we inform Cotta now and nothing happens tomorrow, we’ll only make fools of ourselves. For the police, it’s definitely too early. Let’s first find out where this Dr Arroway lives.”

“Already done that. I called the University of Los Angeles and checked.” Jelena pushed her wheelchair over to the desk, rummaged through the papers lying around for a moment, and finally handed Bob a note. “Here is the address.”

“Then we’d best go there right away,” Jupiter said.

“Did you bring your car?” Jelena asked and Jupiter nodded. “Fine, then I’ll come with you!”

The First Investigator regretted having insisted on coming in the MG. He could easily do without Jelena’s company when visiting Dr Arroway, but he said nothing. In the future, they would take the bikes.

“What’s the deal with this piece of wood?” Jelena asked on the drive to Rocky Beach. They had stowed her wheelchair in the boot. When they got

in, Pete had told her about Jupiter's puzzle. She had been on fire immediately and had joined in.

"What's that all about? The dead man has it in his hands," replied the First Investigator impatiently. "Besides, that wasn't a yes-or-no question."

"Is it a big piece of wood?"

"Define big."

"Bigger than a branch?"

"No."

"Bigger than a pencil?"

"No."

"Bigger than a match?"

"Just as big, I'd say."

"Is it a match?"

"Yes."

"A burned match?"

"No."

"Is the match entirely intact?"

"No."

"Is it broken?"

"Yes."

Jelena pondered for a moment, then a smile came over her face. "Was a decision made using the match?"

Jupiter pulled a wry face. She was quite close to the solution.

"Yes."

"That means the two men in the balloon drew matches. Whoever got the broken one had to do something specific."

"Exactly."

Her smile turned into a big grin. "Then I have the solution!"

"You have the solution?" cried Pete in surprise. "Tell me!"

"The balloon in which they flew into the desert did not have enough gas and sank. So they all dropped unnecessary ballast to avoid being stranded in the desert—including their clothes, so the dead man was naked."

"And what does that have to do with the match?"

"Throwing out things was not enough, and they decided that one of them could survive if the other jumped out and gave the balloon enough lift to get through the desert. Of course, nobody wanted to sacrifice

themselves voluntarily, so they drew matches. And our unfortunate victim drew the short match. Right or wrong?"

"Right," Jupiter admitted with a crunch. "That's the solution."

"It never would have occurred to me in a million years," Pete admitted. "Congratulations, Jelena. You cracked the nut."

"Pure coincidence," claimed the First Investigator.

"Now it's my turn!" cried Jelena exuberantly. "I have a puzzle for you too."

"Tell us later," Jupiter asked. "Because we are here."

He pointed to a street sign in front. Just before the western outskirts of Rocky Beach was Oak Road, a short dead end street with only one house. It was a large, weathered wooden building in the middle of a wildly growing garden at the end of the road. The façade urgently needed a coat of paint, but either Dr Arroway never got around to it or he liked the house as it was.

Pete parked the car at the side near to the gate. He got out and lifted the wheelchair out of the boot. Awkwardly, he unfolded it and wanted to help Jelena out of the car, but she waved him back.

"I can do it myself." She lifted her legs out of the door, grabbed the armrests of the wheelchair and pulled herself over. "Let's go, boys!"

There was no bell at the rusted gate, but it was unlocked. Bob pushed it open with a squeaky sound and entered a flattened path that led through the wild undergrowth to the entrance. Above the wooden door, an archaic-looking deity made of clay stood guard.

Jupiter pressed the bell. A moment later, a woman in her mid-forties, wrapped in colourful woven robes, opened the door. Her dark hair hung stringy in her face. She looked at the four of them in confusion.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, we're here to see Dr Arroway," said the First Investigator.

"What's this all about?"

"It is... a private matter," replied Jupiter evasively.

"Private... okay. Go ahead."

"Excuse me, but we'd like to speak to him personally."

"With him?" The woman frowned. "There is no him."

"But..."

"I am Dr Lou Ann Arroway."

4. Who is Palmer Dixon?

“Oh, I’m... I’m sorry,” Jupe stuttered. “I... I didn’t know...”

“Never mind,” she waved. “May I now know who you are?”

“Jelena Charkova,” Jelena said and shook her hand. “And these three boys are sure to give you one of their infamous business cards right now.”

“Business cards?”

Jupiter quickly pulled a card from his pocket and gave it to Dr Arrowway. “Here you are.”

It said:



“Investigators?” Dr Arrowway raised one eyebrow and smiled unsteadily. “I don’t quite understand. Have I committed a crime?”

“No,” replied Jupiter. “But you could be the victim of a crime.”

“Right,” she agreed with him. “Anyone could do it. Are you here to sell me life insurance? No, thanks. And I have no interest in joining any cult that promises me the end of all evil.”

She was about to close the door when Jelena quickly said: “It’s about the *Popol Vuh*.”

Dr Arrowway paused and examined her from top to bottom. “What do you know about that?”

“Not much,” Jelena confessed. “It’s an old Maya historical sacred book and you bought the translation by Bernardino de Valencia at an auction a few weeks ago.”

“So?”

“And there is reason to believe that someone may be trying to steal it from you.”

The house of Lou Ann Arroway was sparsely furnished. The few pieces of furniture she owned were of old, dark wood. She had decorated every room with Central American artefacts—colourful carpets hung on the walls, wooden masks, clay vessels and countless large and small statues of gods, which stared at the visitors with huge round eyes, stood on the floor or on small tables and shelves.

As soon as The Three Investigators and Jelena had entered the house, they realized why someone paid twenty-five thousand dollars for an old Maya book. Maya culture was obviously Dr Arroway’s passion, in which she invested all her money and time. None of the artwork seemed like a cheap reproduction, she must have paid a fortune for this collection.

“Impressive,” said Jupiter as Dr Arroway showed them around the rooms. “Do you have a safe for the really valuable items?”

“Everything here is really valuable. A safe for that would have to be huge.”

“Aren’t you afraid someone will break in?” Jupe asked.

“No. Most things are pretty big and bulky,” Dr Arroway replied. “You can’t just put it in your pocket and disappear. Not to mention that no one could cash in on them without me knowing about it.”

“Why?” Jupe wondered.

“There aren’t many original Maya artefacts on the art market. Most of the objects are in museums. And for the rest, I know who owns them. I often hang around at auctions, so little by little I get to know the other collectors. There are not many people who are interested in Maya art... Come on, I’ll show you the study.”

She led them into a large room whose walls were crammed with bookshelves that were bursting at the seams.

There were two desks on which two computer monitors protruded between mountains of books and paper.

At one of them sat a young, pretty woman with long blond hair. She looked up from her work and nodded at The Three Investigators and Jelena.

“This is Janet Wells, my assistant. She helps me with my work, picks out research literature, types my texts and so on.”

“Hi,” said Janet and returned to her work on the computer.

“Hi,” greeted Jupiter with a busy voice. His eyes rested a little longer than necessary on the attractive assistant.

“I couldn’t do all this on my own. Besides teaching at the university, I have many research projects. I’m also writing a few books.” Dr Arroway smiled. “Most of my work has to do with the Maya people and culture. Right now I’m in the middle of working on a new book—a new translation of the *Popol Vuh*.”

“The *Popol Vuh* was originally preserved through oral tradition until the 16th century when it was written down. There has been several translations of it from the classical K’iche’ language into Spanish. The most well-known of them was from the 18th century. However, the one I have is an earlier translation done in the 16th century by Bernardino de Valencia. It was one of the first attempts to do it and that is why I was so interested in his version. Here it is, by the way.” Almost casually, she pointed to a large leather-bound volume that lay open on the desk. The yellowed pages were written in ink that had faded over the centuries. “It is not easy to decipher the handwriting. And the old Spanish gives me some trouble. But I’ll manage.”

“You’re just gonna leave the book lying around out here like this?” Pete wondered. “After all, it’s worth twenty-five thousand dollars!”

“Should I put it in a glass case? I’m working with it!” Dr Arroway quipped.

Jupiter approached curiously and looked closely at the open pages. Although he was not bad in Spanish, he could not read a single word. “So this is the *Popol Vuh*,” he murmured.

“The Spanish translation,” Dr Arroway corrected. “And now, please explain how you came to think that it would be stolen from me.” She turned to her assistant. “Can you imagine that, Janet? “These four show up here claiming that someone is out to get the *Popol Vuh*!”

The girl looked surprised. “How did that come about?”

“All right,” Jelena said. “I’ll tell you the whole story.” She reported in detail about her accidentally overhearing the phone call and the checks she did, and occasionally praising The Three Investigators. Jupiter was amazed. Either she wanted to impress Dr Arroway or her contempt for their detective business did not go as far as she always claimed.

Dr Arroway listened patiently. Her reaction was clearly visible in her face. It ranged from wonderment to astonishment to slight doubt. By the end of Jelena’s story, Dr Arroway’s face had darkened.

“What do you say to that?” Bob asked after she had been silent for a while. “Do you think it’s possible that someone really wants to steal the book?”

“I have not thought about it,” Dr Arroway remarked. “But now, I believe that there is someone who might do just that.”

“Palmer Dixon,” said Janet, who had also listened carefully to the story.

“Exactly him,” Dr Arroway remarked.

“Palmer Dixon?” Pete asked. “Who is that?”

“A very unpleasant person whose favourite hobby is to get in my way,” Dr Arroway replied gloomily. “He is a collector like me. We constantly run into each other at exhibitions and auctions. And he is almost always after the same works of art as I am. His expertise is zero, you can tell that immediately. So I suspect that by now he himself is not interested in Maya art at all, but works for someone who prefers to stay in the background.”

“The man on the phone!” Jelena remembered. “The one I couldn’t hear! I’m sure that was his client.”

“Possibly. He seems to have a lot of money—more than I do, anyway. He’s snatched something from under my nose dozens of times.”

“Not this time. You’ve got the *Popol Vuh*,” Jelena remarked.

“But not without a fight, you can believe me. Dixon was at the auction, too. That little greasy guy really jacked up the price! I had planned to pay a maximum of twenty thousand dollars for the book. But he went along. At twenty-five thousand, he finally gave up. With that sum, I had to take out a loan. I hope to get a sufficient advance for the re-translation so that I can appease my bank.”

“Then this Dixon is definitely our first suspect,” Jupiter noted.

“I wouldn’t be surprised that it is him,” Dr Arroway remarked.

“Do you know where Mr Dixon lives?” Jupiter asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“We’ll try to figure this out,” promised the First Investigator. “Then we can watch him tomorrow night.”

“Stay out of his way,” warned Dr Arroway.

“Excuse me?” Pete asked, puzzled.

“I want him to break in here, steal the *Popol Vuh* and be caught on the way back with the loot. It’s the only way to make sure he ends up behind bars. And then I’ll finally be rid of him!”

Janet smiled. “Very clever, Dr Arroway.”

“Dixon has caused me enough trouble already. It’s time he was out of my life.”

5. The Thief Strikes!

“She’s pretty intense,” Pete said on the way back. They had promised to report to Dr Arroway the next day to present her with a plan to convict Palmer Dixon—or whoever was behind it. “I had expected her to go pale and sink to a chair if she learned that someone was trying to break into her house. But instead, she’s looking forward to it!”

“It makes sense,” Jelena said. “She wants to get rid of her arch enemy.”

“If it really is him,” Bob interjected. “What do you think, Jupe? Is this Palmer Dixon behind it?”

“Huh?” Jupiter was interrupted from his thoughts.

“You’ve been somewhat engrossed in thought since we said goodbye to Dr Arroway. What’s wrong?” Bob asked.

“Haven’t you noticed, Bob?” grinned Jelena. “All the time he had eyes for Janet, the pretty blonde assistant!”

“Nonsense! I was just thinking what a fanatical collector you’d have to be to risk a burglary for an historical book—not even the original, just a translation,” Jupe said.

“Just as well,” Pete thought. “After all, this translation is worth twenty-five thousand dollars!”

“Just because Dixon and Dr Arroway bid against each other, without them, the book probably would have gone for half,” Jupiter surmised.

“But then it’s still a lot of money,” Pete said.

“Let’s find out where Dixon lives,” Jelena suggested. “When we catch him, he’ll tell us why he was so hot for the *Popol Vuh*.”

Pete brought Jelena home. After she had sat down in the wheelchair, she said: “Now you can once again prove your abilities as detectives. I’m gonna get on the phone and try to get Dixon’s address. Let’s see who’s faster.”

“Done,” Jupe accepted the challenge and jumped into the car. “Step on it, Pete!”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I don’t want her to get the address before us. I hate to admit it, but she’s good.”

Arriving back at the salvage yard, Jupiter immediately ran to Headquarters, grabbed the phone book and looked under Dixon. There was no ‘Palmer Dixon’ listed.

“Would have been too easy,” muttered the First Investigator, grabbed the phone and tried the operator.

There were only three Palmer Dixons in all of California, but brief test calls confirmed Jupiter’s fears—the art collector was not among them. “Nothing.”

“And now what?” Pete asked at a loss.

“Now we call some auction houses. Maybe they know something. I imagine they send out exclusive invitations for upcoming auctions. Then there are the museums, showrooms, and so on.”

“With horror, I await our next phone bill,” Bob said, shuddered. “And all this is completely unnecessary. Jelena agreed to look for the address, so why not let her do the work? It’s nice of her.”

“Nice?” Jupiter snorted contemptuously. “She’s only doing it to outwit us.”

“To annoy you,” Bob corrected. “It’s your own fault for getting involved in her game.”

Jupiter did not go into it, but chose the next number without hesitation.

The Three Investigators spent the rest of the afternoon at Headquarters. In many offices, nobody could be reached and the few pieces of information they received was not very promising. When it was finally seven o’clock, no one answered the phone anywhere.

“That was it,” Jupiter moaned. “Not a very successful afternoon.”

“Will you just give up?” Pete asked. “Because I’m bored to death. Can we get on with more important things now?”

“Like what?” Juve asked.

“For example, the plan we want to present to Dr Arroway tomorrow,” Pete said. “We can’t tail Palmer Dixon because we haven’t found his address, so we’ll have to come up with something else.”

“All right.” Juve turned his back to the phone, made himself comfortable on the desk chair and began to pinch his lower lip. “I have an idea about that.”

The next morning right after breakfast, Jupiter decided to call Dr Arroway and arrange a meeting with her. It did not take The Three Investigators long to come up with a plan. After all, catching a burglar red-handed was not particularly difficult for them. Nevertheless, he was excited when he opened the door to the trailer. Even the best plan sometimes went wrong and one must never forget that something unforeseen could always happen.

When he entered the trailer, he saw the answering machine flashing. He rewound the tape and listened to the message: “Hello, Jupiter, this is Lou Ann Arroway. Please call me back immediately, something terrible has happened!”

“End of message,” the answering machine announced.

Nervously, the First Investigator rummaged for the note on which he had noted down the number of the cultural historian. It wasn’t long before Dr Arroway answered, “Yes?”

“Dr Arroway? This is Jupiter Jones. What happened?”

“Good that you called, Jupiter! You were right. Someone is after the book!”

“How do you know that?”

“The *Popol Vuh* was stolen last night!”

6. The Stranger at the Window

Half an hour later, The Three Investigators reached Dr Arroway's house. Jupiter had immediately called Bob and Pete, informed them of the news and arranged a meeting point in the city park of Rocky Beach. Then they cycled together to Oak Road. They had just parked their bikes when a car approached and stopped in front of the house.

Janet got out. "Good morning, you three! Have you heard?"

Jupiter nodded. "Dr Arroway called us. Do you have any details?"

"No. She just said that the book was stolen and that I should come straight here."

At that moment, the front door opened and Dr Arroway stormed out. "Thank goodness you're here," she exclaimed in disbelief. She fell into Janet's arms. "Oh, Janet! The *Popol Vuh* is gone! Twenty-five thousand dollars! Not to mention the true value of the book!"

"The true value?" asked Jupiter in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she stammered. "It... it's one of a kind and priceless to me! If I don't get it back, my whole project will be ruined! All the preparations I've already made! There are months of work in there!"

"What exactly happened?" Bob wanted to know.

"If I only knew," she replied desperately. "I got up quite normally today and wanted to get to work right after breakfast. The weekends are always especially precious to me because from Monday onwards I have half a day's work at the university and I don't get to do the translation. So I went into the study—and the book was gone!"

"Where did you leave it last night?"

"On the desk, as always. I had thought about your story, but Jelena said that the theft was planned for tonight. So I went to sleep calmly. But apparently, Dixon had changed his mind.

"Or Jelena has misheard," Jupiter added gloomily.

"You don't believe that yourself," Bob defended the girl. "She would never make such a serious mistake."

"Be that as it may, the *Popol Vuh* is gone," the First Investigator noted. "We shouldn't have felt so safe to only guard the book tonight."

Upset with himself, he turned to Dr Arroway. "Have you any idea how the burglar got into the house?"

She shook her head. "I haven't looked around too much yet. Anyway, the windows were closed."

"Let's take a look at the crime scene," Jupiter decided.

"I thought I'd call you first before alerting the police," said Dr Arroway on the way in. "They'd probably turn the place upside down and block my work for days. You know how it is."

"We can still inform the police," Jupiter agreed with her. "The problem with police officers is that they usually chase us away immediately to check for evidences. But we can also do that, because we brought our equipment with us. He pointed to his backpack in which he had stowed everything they needed to take fingerprints and other evidences.

The study looked exactly as they had left it the day before. At first glance, there was nothing to indicate a break-in. Jupe got a brief overview, then he turned to Bob and Pete. "The best thing is to split up. Bob, you check the windows, Pete takes the front door, I'll take the desk. Get to work, fellas." He handed out the equipment and they started brushing the suspicious spots with the fingerprint powder.

"Very professional," said Janet, who watched them with interest. "The police couldn't do a better job."

"We have some experience in such things," Jupiter replied immodestly.

"And what about the Dr Arroway's and my fingerprints?" Janet asked. "I'm sure they're everywhere."

"We'll take a sample from you and compare it with the prints we get. I don't hope for too much—any half-smart burglar uses gloves—but we can't leave anything unchecked."

"Then you have a real chance. I wouldn't exactly call Palmer Dixon an intelligent person," Janet quipped.

"You know him too?" Jupiter asked curiously.

The assistant nodded. "I work very closely with Dr Arroway and have accompanied her to several auctions. Dixon is a creep with too much money, but I don't think he's particularly smart."

"I suppose so," agreed Dr Arroway. "Have you found out his address yet?"

The First Investigator shook his head regretfully. "Sadly, no. The name was known to some people I spoke to yesterday, but nobody could tell us where he lived. Or maybe Palmer Dixon isn't his real name. If it's true that he works for someone else, it's reasonable to assume he's assumed a second identity. That way, neither he nor the person he's working for can be traced."

"What about Jelena," asked Bob, who had opened the window of the study and was examining the traces from the garden. "She wanted to go searching as well."

"Do you think she found out anything?" Jupiter wondered. "If she had, she would have told us at once, so we could act on it."

"It can't hurt to ask her," Bob said. "May I use your telephone, Dr Arrowway?"

"Of course. The phone is in the hall."

Bob climbed into the house through the window and left the study. While he was talking to Jelena, Dr Arrowway sat down on the edge of her desk, exhausted.

"I still can't believe it. I spent all my money on the *Popol Vuh*. And now it's been stolen! If I don't get it back, my dream project is dead forever."

Janet sat down beside her and put her arm around her shoulder. "You're gonna be all right. After all, we have three detectives on the case right away."

"Do not worry, Dr Arrowway," Jupiter assured. "We'll find the *Popol Vuh*, I'm sure. So far, we've solved every case we had."

"What about the police?" Dr Arrowway asked.

"Give us two more days," Jupiter asked. "If we haven't found out anything by then, we can always inform Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach police. But I'm sure we'll have results in two days. It can't be that difficult to locate this Palmer Dixon."

Dr Arrowway nodded weakly. "All right. That is if he is the thief."

Bob returned. "I spoke with Jelena. She didn't find out anything about Dixon, either. But she insists on coming here."

Jupiter rolled his eyes. "Why? Couldn't you talk her out of it?"

"Why? After all, she is our real client," Bob said. "She's calling her driver right now, who her father hired for her, and will be there in half an hour."

By the time Jelena arrived, The Three Investigators had completed their search. They were in the process of comparing the fingerprints that had been recovered with those of Dr Arroway and Janet, who were looking over their shoulders.

Jelena's greeting was a slight nod. Then she said to Jupiter in a cool tone: "I would like to talk to you in private for a moment!" When they had left the study, Jelena didn't hold back her annoyance. "Why didn't you call me immediately?" she nagged.

"Hello, Jelena." Jupiter smiled softly. "Because it would have made no difference, that's why."

"It would have made a difference. I'm the one who came across this case. I want to be involved in everything that happens."

"Do you think you could have done more than we did in the last hour?" Jupiter ran at her angrily. "If you hire us as detectives, you must also trust us and let us do our job! There was never any question of us keeping you informed of everything we do."

"That goes without saying!" Jelena quipped.

Bob showed up in the doorway. "Guys!" he interrupted her. "Could you possibly postpone this until later? We have more important things to do! Pete and I just compared the last set of prints. Unfortunately, all of them are either Dr Arroway's or Janet's."

Jelena laughed mockingly. "Did you think the thief had never heard of gloves? Besides, we know who it was—Palmer Dixon!"

"That has not yet been proven," contradicted Jupiter. "He is only our prime suspect."

"Still, even if you had found fingerprints, you'd still be unable to compare them," Jelena remarked. "First, you need to find Dixon. So how's your investigation going? Nowhere."

"And you?" asked Jupiter snappily.

"Hey!" Pete's call came from the study. "Come here quick!"

They ended the argument and returned to the room. "What is it?"

"There's someone in the garden!" Pete whispered.

"What? Where?" Juve asked.

Dr Arroway, standing with her back to the window, turned. "It's Dixon! He's running away!"

"He overheard us!" cried Jupiter. "Go after him!"

The Second Investigator and Janet took off at the same time and got in each other's way at the window. Pete stumbled over Janet's feet and

slammed his head on the window sill. "Ouch!" he shouted, struggling to get himself up.

"I'm... sorry," Janet stammered and started climbing out.

"We'll run out the front!" cried Bob and ran with Jupiter through the hall to the front door. When they opened it, a little bald man was running down the street.

"If he's on foot, we'll catch him!" Bob jumped on his bike, but forgot it was locked and fell. "Damn it!"

While he hurriedly pulled the key out of his pocket, Pete sprinted past him and took up pursuit. When Bob finally opened the lock, the Second Investigator had already disappeared around the next corner. Bob pedalled, fired into the main street and came just in time to see Pete running behind a speeding dirty grey Ford. The car accelerated too fast. Neither of them had a chance.

"What a bummer! He got away from us," Pete gasped. "If only we had taken the car today!" At that moment, a car with squealing tyres pulled up beside them. The door was ripped open. "Come on, jump in!" cried Jupiter. "Come on!"

Bob and Pete squeezed into the back seat and the car started moving. At the wheel sat a young man, hardly older than themselves, whom neither of them had ever seen before.

"This is John, Jelena's driver," Jupiter explained succinctly. "He was waiting for her outside the house. Step on it, John!"

"I... I don't know what this is all about," cried John, irritated. "What is it all about? Did I end up in a detective story or what?"

"Exactly," replied the First Investigator. "A valuable Maya sacred book has been stolen and in the grey Ford is the alleged thief. By the way, he's just off to the left, in case you didn't notice."

John threw an astonished look at him. "Cool," he said, stepping on the accelerator. "And you're those three detectives that Jelena was so upset about?"

Jupiter pulled a wry face. "Must be so, then."

"You must be Jupiter."

"Jelena seems to have told you quite a bit," Pete remarked amused.

"Oh, we get along just fine. She's a very nice girl. Which one of you is Bob?"

"Me."

John looked at him through the rear-view mirror and grinned. "Aha!"

Bob blushed and said harshly, “Focus on driving, okay?”

There were two other cars between them and Dixon. Here the road had only one lane, John couldn’t overtake and the distance to the grey Ford became bigger and bigger. Then there was an intersection with traffic lights. Dixon chased over at yellow, but the next car was already slowing down.

“Damn it!” cried Jupiter. “Can’t you overtake?”

But it was already too late, the cross traffic was already rolling across the road. They watched helplessly as Dixon disappeared behind a bend.

7. The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup

“That’s what I meant when I said I was bad at car chases.” Jelena looked at The Three Investigators reproachfully. “That’s the kind of case I was counting on you for.”

“Stop blaming us all the time,” Jupiter snapped. “John was driving.”

“And the licence plate?” Dr Arroway asked. “You really couldn’t read it?”

“It was covered with dirt,” Pete replied. “The whole car was just a crust of dust. I’m not even sure if it was really grey. Probably a bright red or something was hiding under the smear film.”

“That would be a problem tracking the culprit,” Bob admitted.

“Why?” Janet didn’t seem to understand the pessimism. “We saw it was Palmer Dixon, so at least now we know that he has something to do with the theft.”

“Really? I don’t think so.” Jupiter worked on his lower lip. “As a matter of fact, I think less and less that he was the thief. Why would he have come here today, when he already has the *Popol Vuh*?”

“The killer always returns to the scene of the crime,” Janet claimed.

“Perhaps. But not when it’s so risky for him,” Jupiter said. “He should expect the whole place to be swarming with cops. So why was he here?”

“Maybe he lost something,” Bob thought. “A piece of evidence. And he wanted to get it before somebody found it.”

Jupiter snapped his fingers. “Good idea, Bob! Maybe he hadn’t found it when Pete saw him. Come on, fellas, let’s go search the garden!”

The Three Investigators ran outside and began to inspect the property thoroughly. But because the grass and lots of wild plants had been growing unchecked for months, this task proved to be more difficult than expected.

“A needle in a haystack is nothing compared to this,” moaned Pete.

“Stop! I’ve found something!” cried Bob, bent down and picked up a small object. “Look! A little gold pendant. Looks like a figure of a deity or something.”

“Oh, that’s mine!” Dr Arroway, who had followed the search from the window, waved him over and took a closer look at the pendant. “Oh,

indeed, it's been missing for months!" She smiled. "It's good to have detectives in the house." But her smile died back immediately. "Is that all you found?"

Jupiter shook his head. "But we're not quite finished yet." But the rest of the search did not yield any results either. Perplexed, they met in the study to discuss their next steps.

"Whether Dixon is the thief or not, he is somehow involved," Jelena was convinced. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have fled."

"For once I agree with you," nodded Jupiter. "So we have to get to him somehow."

"How can we proceed if he's working under a false name?" Pete wanted to know.

"How about a decoy?" Bob thought. "You could pretend to have one of your pieces of art for sale, Dr Arroway—an object that Palmer Dixon is keen to acquire. He'll suspect you want to sell it to cover your bank loan."

Jupiter shook his head. "He won't," he contradicted. "He'd smell the roast in a minute. No, I don't think Palmer Dixon will show up at any future exhibitions or auctions. He knows we've seen him and we're on to him. We have to think of something else."

"And what would that be?" Bob asked.

Thoughtfully, the First Investigator pinched his lower lip.

"Will that help?" mocked Jelena.

Jupiter's hand flinched back. "I have an idea!"

"And what is that?" Pete said.

"The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup!"

Pete snapped his fingers. "That is it! The grey Ford!"

"Exactly!" cried Bob. "This old car's gonna stick out, so we got a good chance with the Hookup."

"Uh..." Jelena spoke up. "Would you kindly let us mere mortals in on this? Who or what is the ghost Hookup?"

"An old trick of ours," replied Jupiter. "Very simple, but extremely effective."

"Get to the point!" Jelena snapped.

"The point is that we're looking for an old grey Ford, whose licence plate is so dirty you can't see it. There are millions of registered vehicles in the Los Angeles area. Even with a dragnet, the police have little chance of finding it without a licence plate."

"But you do," Jelena suspected sceptically.

“Right. By using the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup to activate our thousands upon thousands of spies within hours, who will keep an eye out for us.”

“Now you’re completely crazy,” Jelena mocked. “What kind of spies? Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all.” Jupiter smiled happily. At last, he had an ace up his sleeve with Jelena. He had to savour the moment. “The Hookup works like this—each of us calls a handful of friends, acquaintances or relatives and tells them that we’re looking for an old, grey Ford covered with dirt with no readable licence plate. And these friends then call a few friends again and pass on the search message with the request to call more people as well. If everyone who receives a call only informs five friends, our request to look for the car would reach tens of thousands of people tonight. And experience shows that they are spread out over a wide radius.”

“And it works?” Dr Arroway asked, astonished.

“We have already achieved success with this method,” said Jupiter proudly. “The only problem is that after a while, mistakes creep in when our enquiry gets repeated many times. For example, people call us about a yellow Chevrolet and think we could do something with it. But all in all, people are very cooperative.”

“Amazing,” Janet thought. “I didn’t think so many people would actually go through with it.”

Bob smiled. “The secret is that we mainly call children and young people. Adults often dismiss the Hookup as nonsense and bring it to a halt, but children are fiercely involved.”

“Here we go,” cried Dr Arroway enthusiastically. “I am happy for you to use my phone to start the Hookup and will participate in it myself. The more people join, the better, eh, Janet?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know any children,” she said apologetically. “And neither would anyone else who would take the matter seriously. Besides, I have some paperwork to do. Since all we can do now is wait anyway, I’ll get to work.” She sat down at her little desk in the corner and turned on the computer.

“Let’s get the Hookup rolling,” said Pete and reached for the phone. “The first thing I’m going to do is call Jeffrey. He always wanted to help us.”

Jupiter turned to Jelena and said: “What about you? Will you join us?”

“I can’t imagine that we’re really going to succeed in this, but it can’t hurt,” she replied mildly.

Half an hour later, the Hookup rolled out. Since there was now nothing more to do for The Three Investigators in Dr Arroway's house, they said goodbye to the cultural historian and promised to contact her as soon as there was any news. Jelena had John take her home and the three rode their bikes back to the salvage yard. Pete was the first to rush into Headquarters. His first look was at the answering machine.

"We already have a message!" He rewound the tape and listened to it: "Hi, this is Jeffrey. That's really cool, your Hookup system. I immediately called eight people and I'm curious—have you found the car yet? Tell Pete to call me if he finds anything new. *Ciao!*" The Second Investigator grinned in agony. "Well, that was nothing."

Bob looked at the clock. "It's too early, too. The first calls went out an hour ago. It would be a miracle if anyone had spotted that grey Ford so soon."

Jupiter nodded in agreement. "We can't expect useful results until tonight."

"Eternal waiting," Pete moaned. "That's what sucks about the Hookup."

"Juupeeterrr!" Aunt Mathilda's voice echoed unmistakably across the salvage yard.

"Oh, no," groaned the First Investigator. "That's her there's-work-for-you cry. I'd know it anywhere."

"Well, that's just great to be distracted till tonight," Pete remarked.

In fact, Aunt Mathilda had to work for them all day. It was Sunday and the salvage yard was closed, so Mathilda used the opportunity to clean up undisturbed.

The Three Investigators slaved in the sun, carrying cartons and boxes from one corner to the other, unpacking new goods, re-sorting old goods and sticking small price tags on them. They constantly felt as if they heard the phone. Pete left everything twice and ran to the trailer, because he was convinced each time that there would be some news... but until early evening not a single call came. They had finally finished work and were sitting at the veranda of the salvage yard office covered in dust. While being pampered by Aunt Mathilda with cherry cake and orange juice, they heard the phone ring.

Pete jumped up as if he had sat down on a hot stove. "Finally!" He started running. Bob and Jupe waited in suspense. But when Pete returned,

they already recognized from his slowly trotting walk that there were no news.

“It was a Susan from Thousand Oaks,” he reported. “She saw an old, dirty Ford, but in blue, not grey. Tough luck.”

The bad luck continued all evening. More than a dozen calls were received, but each time the caller had misunderstood the search message. Around half past ten, Jupiter let himself sink in frustration into his chair. “This is not going to work. It’s too late now and usually no one calls anymore.”

“I think so,” nodded Bob. “Maybe tomorrow morning.”

“We’ll have to go to school,” Pete moaned. “Palmer Dixon is probably long gone by now.”

“Who knows. We’ve never tried a Hookup of phones across America,” Bob joked. “If each of us calls not five, but twenty people, it could spread like wild fire. I’ve got relatives on the East Coast, so we’ll roll up the field from both sides.”

“And, by the way, we will also shut down the entire telephone network,” laughed Jupiter. “Forget it!” He yawned. “I have to go to bed. Today was really exhausting. And in the morning, we’ll meet here before first period and see if anyone else has called.”

But even the next morning, The Three Investigators were disappointed. The light did not flash, which meant no call had been received.

“Bummer,” mumbled Pete. “And now history with Mrs Seven is in the first two hours! It’s gonna be a great day.”

They were about to close the trailer door when the phone rang.

“It’s probably Jelena who wants to know if we’ve found anything yet,” Bob said and picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking.”

Hastily, he pushed the loudspeaker button and waved for the other two to come back into the trailer.

A boy’s voice came out of the loudspeaker: “This is Tom Gordon. You’re the ones looking for that grey Ford, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s right—an old car, pretty grimy, was seen yesterday at noon on West Rocky Beach.”

“I know that car. It’s right here on the road.”

8. Looking for Dixon

“Say that again?”

“It’s our neighbour’s car. A 1976 model, isn’t it?”

“We don’t know the year, but it could be,” Bob said. “Where do you live?”

“In Pacific Palisades. But I have to get to school right now, so you can’t come over.”

“All you have to do is give us the address.”

“Our neighbour lives at 13 Washington Drive.”

“What’s his name?”

“Parker Wilson. Should I tell him you’re looking for him?”

“No! No!” cried Bob quickly. “This... this is supposed to be... a surprise. Tell me, Tom, could you describe your neighbour to us? Just so we know he’s really the one.”

“He’s one of those little skinny bald guys,” Tom replied. “Kind of nice, actually, but also a bit weird. Has he done something wrong?”

“We don’t know that yet. We’re still in the middle of the investigation. Top secret, you understand?”

“All right. But that reminds me. His car was only grey until yesterday afternoon. Then he washed it outside his garage and repainted it. Now it’s green. Does that mean anything?”

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise and gave Jupe and Pete meaningful looks. “It could be, Tom. Thanks for calling. You’ve been a big help.”

“No problem.”

Bob hung up. “Bull’s-eye!”

“You can say that again,” Jupe confirmed. “Now we have him!”

“Have you noticed the names? Palmer Dixon, Parker Wilson. Sounds pretty similar!” Bob remarked.

“And we have not only his address, but also a very valuable other information—he repainted his car. What do you think?” Jupiter looked at his fellow detectives questioningly.

Pete frowned. “Well, it kind of sounds like...”

“It’s like he was warned,” Bob intervened. “It was as if he knew we were going to track him down with our Hookup.”

Jupiter nodded. “Strange, isn’t it?”

“Oh, damn!” cried Pete. “The first lesson is about to start! If I’m late at Mrs Seven’s class, there’ll be trouble! Let’s get on with the case this afternoon.” He rushed out frantically from Headquarters.

“How about you, Bob?”

“I’ll be right behind you. You go on ahead,” Bob said. “I just have to do one last thing.”

When Jupiter and Pete left Headquarters, Bob picked up the phone and dialled Jelena’s number. He wanted to give her the news, but Jupiter didn’t have to know. Hopefully, she wasn’t on her way to school yet.

“Yeah?”

“Mr Charkov? This is Bob Andrews. Is Jelena still there?”

“Hello, Bob. Yeah, just a minute, I’ll get her!”

A moment later, she was on the phone. “Bob? Is there any news?”

“You bet.” He told her about Tom’s call.

“Jupiter believes that Dixon was warned. What do you think of that?”

“This confirms my suspicions,” Jelena replied mysteriously.

“What suspicions?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Come on, Jelena. I am not Jupiter! You can tell me what you suspect.”

“I want to check out the suspicion first,” she replied evasively.

“All right,” Bob said. “This afternoon we’ll probably drive to Pacific Palisades and check out Dixon. It’s not far from here. Do you want to come? Do you want us to pick you up?”

“Jupiter would thank you,” Jelena remarked.

“Oh, forget Jupiter! So, are you in?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Jelena said. “I have an appointment right after school.”

“Violin lesson?”

“That too, but only later.”

“And before that?”

“Let’s just say I have to do some investigation.”

“I was seriously afraid that you had called Jelena this morning and asked her if she wanted to come along,” Jupe said as they drove to Pacific

Palisades in Pete's MG.

Bob looked away embarrassed. "To be honest, I actually did that."

"What?" Jupe cried.

"Don't panic, she said no. No time."

"Well, that's too bad," Jupiter said ironically.

"I thought she didn't want to miss the slightest detail of this case," Pete said. "Does she have an appointment that is more important?"

Bob considered whether he should tell his friends about Jelena's mysterious allusions. But he could imagine Jupiter's reaction exactly and decided against a new Jelena discussion. He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"We're almost there," Pete noticed and pointed to the next street sign—Washington Drive. He turned left.

Washington Drive was in a typical American small town with wide side-walks, well-kept front gardens and houses that all looked about the same. A paper boy cycled at a crazy pace just past the hedges and skilfully threw the weekly newspaper to the street's residents. Here and there, some children were playing basketball in the garage driveways and Bob wondered if Tom was among them.

"Now what?" Pete asked.

"Now you drive past house number 13 and park somewhere inconspicuous," Jupe said.

"Inconspicuous? I didn't know you could park inconspicuously or discreetly."

"Just park by the side of the road, but not in front of the house," Jupiter instructed.

"All right." Pete steered the car into the shade of a tree and stopped. They were only about 10 metres away from Dixon's house. "I don't think anyone's home," he said.

"Did you see? The garage door was open, but the car was gone," Jupiter said.

"Dixon's probably at work," Bob said. "Whatever he does when he's not stealing historical books."

"So let's wait for him," Jupiter suggested.

They waited long. Although Pete had chosen a place in the shade, it was hot in the car. But they didn't dare get out of the car for fear of being discovered by Palmer Dixon, who could return at any moment.

“Maybe we should question the children over there,” the Second Investigator suggested after three hours of boredom.

“About what?” Jupe asked.

“About Dixon, or Wilson. I think they might know something about him.”

“Better not,” contradicted Jupiter. “This is such a dull nest, everyone knows everyone. Dixon would have noticed that someone was looking for him. And then he’d know that we were on to him.”

9. Jelena is Missing

The sun was setting. The children disappeared from the street, the lights in the houses went on, but there was still no sign of Palmer Dixon. The hours passed slowly.

“I don’t believe it,” growled Bob. “He has to come home sometime!”

“It might not be so stupid if he doesn’t,” Jupiter thought and pinched his lower lip.

“What do you mean?” Pete asked lurking. “There’s another undertone in your voice, Jupiter Jones.”

“What undertone?”

“You know. An I-have-a-plan-that-you-won’t-like-it undertone,” Pete said.

The First Investigator was smiling. “Am I that easy to see through? All right, my plan is very simple. Palmer Dixon is not back yet and it is dark by now. What could be more obvious than to take a closer look at his house?”

“How close?” Pete asked.

“Well, minus two to ten metres,” Jupiter quipped.

“You want to go into his house?” cried Pete. “I knew it. Admit it, this was your plan from the beginning.”

Jupiter shook his head. “It was not. But the opportunity is favourable now. Why should we pass it up?”

“Jupe is right,” Bob agreed. “With any luck, the *Popol Vuh* just lays around in Dixon’s study and the case is solved.”

“You don’t believe that yourself,” Pete cried. “How are you even gonna get in the house?”

“It’s obvious. With your help!” Jupe said.

“Excellent!” complained the Second Investigator. “Everything starts with me!”

“You’re the one who’s always carrying around a case with lock picks,” Jupiter explained. “And the only one who can handle it best.”

“I’m a fool,” grumbled Pete. “Why do I bring these stupid lock picks every time? It’s always trouble! I’ll purposely forget them next time.”

“Come on, there’s nobody on the street right now!” Jupiter opened the door and got out. Bob and Pete followed him.

By now it had become very dark. They could hear a few cars from a distance, a dog barking, otherwise it was quiet. Unseen, they entered the front garden.

“Stay away from the front door,” Jupe whispered. “Otherwise the motion detector might switch the lights on. Let’s take a look around the back.”

The Three Investigators circled the house. All windows were dark and closed. They tried to peer through the windows, but could see nothing. At the back of the house, there was a patio.

The door was closed, but Jupiter was confident. “A patio door will be no problem for you, Pete?”

“Not really,” he replied reluctantly.

“Then get to work!”

The Second Investigator crept out of the shade of the bushes and entered the moonlit patio. It seemed to Pete as if a blindingly bright spotlight was directed at him. He was sure to be spotted at any moment by a neighbour looking into Mr Dixon’s garden from the upper floor. He quickly took a look at the lock. It only took him a second to realize what a disaster it was. Disappointed and relieved at the same time, he ducked and ran back to his friends.

“It’s a special lock. I can’t open it with my regular tools.”

“Looks like good old Palmer Dixon is pretty scared of burglars,” said Jupiter. “It’s probably because he keeps some extremely valuable art objects in his house.”

“So what do we do now?” whispered Bob.

“Pete, where are your other lock picks?” Jupe asked.

“They are all at Headquarters,” Pete replied.

“So we go back to Headquarters and get the tools that fit that lock,” Jupe decided.

“And what about Dixon? He could come back at any moment,” Bob said.

“Therefore, one of us will remain here and continue to watch the house.”

“I know who,” grinned Bob. “You, Jupe!”

“I don’t mind.”

“All right. Pete and I are going to Headquarters,” Bob said. “How long do you think it’ll take to get the tools, Pete?”

“I know what I need, and I know where it is. We’ll be back in an hour or so. Let’s hope we don’t miss anything.”

They ran back to the car and drove off.

“Ten already,” Pete said after looking at the clock. “I don’t want to go to bed late tonight so that I can get to school on time tomorrow for once. But if we actually make it into the house, Jupe will probably want to search every single room from top to bottom. That could take a while. I wouldn’t mind if my attempt to pick the lock triggered an alarm or something... and we’d have to leave in a hurry and go home.”

When they reached the salvage yard, the big gate to the site was already closed. But that didn’t matter, because The Three Investigators had equipped the wooden fence that surrounded the yard with secret entrances.

One of these entrances, Red Gate Rover, was hidden in a picture painted on the wooden fence—the Great Fire of San Francisco. There was a little dog watching the fire and one of his eyes was actually a knot in the wood, through which there was a trigger. Activating this would enable boards to swing open. Pete and Bob squeezed through and went over to the open air workshop.

While Pete was looking for his tools, the phone rang in the trailer. When Bob entered Headquarters, he noticed that the answering machine was flashing. That meant that there were messages. He picked up the phone.

“The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking”

A man with a strong Russian accent was on the line. “Hello, Bob, this is Mr Charkov. Finally, someone is here. I’ve tried to call a few times. Tell me, is Jelena with you?”

“No.”

“No?” Mr Charkov sounded horrified. “Do you know where she is?”

“I have no idea,” Bob confessed. “Has something happened?”

“I... I hope not!” stammered Mr Charkov. “But Jelena has disappeared without a trace!”

10. Mysterious E-Mails

“What do you mean?” Bob asked.

“She never came home from school today. The food she was supposed to heat up is still in the fridge.”

“Was she at school?”

“Yeah. You were on the phone with her this morning, so I thought maybe you were on a date.”

“No, she said she didn’t have time.”

“Did she tell you what she was doing today?”

Bob felt heat rising in him. “No. Uh, that is... Violin lessons, I think.”

“Yes. I called her teacher. She never showed up there,” Mr Charkov said. “I’m so worried! She’s never been out this late before! At least not without telling me.”

“Calm down, Mr Charkov! She’ll be all right!” Bob listened to himself and realized how little he was convinced by his own words.

“It would be best if I called the police immediately,” said Mr Charkov.

“I don’t think they would do much unless she’s not home by tomorrow morning—”

“Tomorrow morning? You... you mean something might have happened to her?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I know Jelena quite well now. She can take care of herself very well.”

“She’s in a wheelchair,” contradicted Mr Charkov. “She may be able to defend herself with her mouth, but otherwise... I will call the police!”

“There’s nothing they can do,” Bob said. “You can’t report someone as missing until they’ve been gone for at least twenty-four hours. Look, Mr Charkov, calm down and go to sleep. Jelena is probably just at a friend’s house and forgot to tell you. I’m sure she’ll turn up soon.”

“If you think so,” replied Mr Charkov with little conviction. “All right, thanks a lot, Bob.”

“You’re welcome. Good night.” Bob hung up. He got a frigid shiver down his spine.

Pete burst in. “I have my tools! Let’s go!”

“Jelena’s gone.”

“What?”

Bob told him the story. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“What? That she’s with a friend?”

“No. That something really happened to her,” Bob said.

“What makes you think that?”

“Something she told me this morning on the phone,” Bob recalled.

“Jelena told me that she had to investigate.”

“Investigate what?”

“If I only knew,” Bob sighed. “She wouldn’t tell me, but she sounded very mysterious. I think she was mad because we hadn’t called her immediately when someone stole the *Popol Vuh*. Now she wants to investigate on her own.”

“How could she investigate?” Pete thought. “She knows as much as we do.”

“I don’t think so. She talked like she had a secret, like she knew more than we do.”

“Maybe she tracked down Palmer Dixon before us and confronted him,” it flashed through Pete’s mind, “and then he kidnapped her so she wouldn’t talk.”

“Or worse. Come on, we have to get back to Jupe!”

Jupiter stepped from one foot to the other, bored. Being in the car had been more convenient for watching Dixon’s house. And warmer. After the sun had set, it had cooled down fast and Jupiter was only wearing a thin T-shirt. Shivering, he folded his arms.

A car turned onto Washington Drive. The First Investigator looked at his watch. Pete and Bob had only been gone a good half hour. If they were coming back now, they had hurried very much.

The car slowed down and stopped directly under a street lamp in front of house number 13. It was a green Ford. Jupiter winced and retreated a little further into the shade of the tree. A small, slim man with a bald head got out and disappeared hastily into the house.

Jupiter left his cover and headed for the car. The first thing he did was to write down the licence plate, which was now easy to read. Then he looked back at the house. There were no lights anywhere. But then Jupiter spotted a pale, bluish glimmer behind one of the windows. Carefully, he walked nearer and risked a glance. It was the living room. Dixon sat at a

small desk and was about to boot up the computer. He typed on the keyboard while staring at the screen.

His face glowed in eerie green. Jupiter could hardly see anything but it looked as if Dixon was reading his incoming emails. It didn't seem like much, because after only two minutes, he turned off the computer, stood up and left the room. Jupiter rushed back to his hiding place among the bushes. A short time later, Jupe heard the door, then a car engine. Just as the First Investigator peered out, the green Ford drove away.

"Damn!" Jupiter cursed softly. "Of all the times Bob and Pete aren't here!"

However, it was not long before they returned. Jupiter waited for them under the tree.

"There you are at last. Unfortunately you are too late. Dixon was just here, but immediately left again. I would have loved to have chased him, but I guess that's over now. Did you—" Jupiter broke off when he saw their distraught faces. "Is something wrong?"

"Jelena has been kidnapped," Pete said.

"Not so fast. Until now, she has simply disappeared," Bob corrected. "But we fear she may have been kidnapped."

"Slowly, slowly! Jelena? How did you know that she is missing?"

Bob told him about Jelena's mysterious innuendoes and Mr Charkov's phone call. "Of course he overreacted," he tried to reassure himself. "After all, it's not that late. But I'm still worried."

"Do you think Dixon had something to do with her disappearance, Jupe?" Pete asked.

"Could be. If she was really reckless enough to do anything on her own. You never know with Jelena! Maybe we'll find out something if we take a little look around Mr Dixon's place. Do you have your tools, Pete?"

"All here."

"Good. Let's do it."

They returned to the patio door and Pete tried to pick the lock. "Bummer! There's not enough light, I can hardly see!"

"We can't use flashlights under any circumstances, otherwise the neighbours will see us," whispered Bob. "Can't you make it without light?"

"Are you kidding? Of course I can make it," Pete snapped. "It's just taking me longer and I have to concentrate."

He continued to poke into the lock with small wires and hooks. A few minutes later, the lock gave way with a click and the door swung open with a creaking sound.

“Come in!” They crept into the house in total darkness.

“Let’s have a look around first,” Jupiter suggested.

“See? I knew Jupe will say that,” Pete mocked.

Then something rumbled.

“Shh!” Bob hissed and held his breath. “Did you hear that? Someone’s here!”

“Don’t panic, it was me,” Pete whispered. “I bumped into something.”

“Don’t drop a million-dollar Ming vase, Pete!” Jupe quipped.

“Can’t we draw the curtains and put the lights on?” the Second Investigator suggested. “Then no one outside would see it.”

“Too dangerous,” Jupiter disagreed. “A little light shines through anyway and Dixon could come back at any moment. I suggest that one of us should stand guard at the window.”

“I volunteer,” Pete said. “At least then I won’t break anything.”

While Pete looked at the deserted street, Jupiter and Bob wandered through the house. Slowly they got used to the dimness and saw something more than just black shadows. The house was small and the four rooms were quickly explored.

Nowhere did they find anything out of the ordinary.

“No *Popol Vuh*, no Ming vases and no other objects of art,” Jupiter stated.

“And no kidnapped Jelena,” Bob added. “Palmer Dixon seems like a normal man with normal interests. This is certainly not what you’d expect from the home of a criminal.”

“Let’s have a look at the computer,” Jupiter suggested. “Dixon was in quite a hurry when he got here. He just quickly read his incoming e-mail and then he ran off. Maybe there was something important there.”

They went into the living room, where the First Investigator sat at the desk and turned on the computer. Now Bob drew the curtains so that the dull glow of the monitor would not get outside.

“There it is,” said Jupiter with satisfaction. “Dixon’s mailbox. Let me see if I can open it.” He clicked on something here and there and finally growled reluctantly.

“What’s wrong?” Bob asked.

“It needs a password. That’s to be expected.”

“So what now? Can you get around it?” Bob said.

“It’s not that simple. But I could try some passwords.”

“How about *Popol Vuh*?” Bob suggested.

“I don’t think so, but it’s worth a try.” Jupiter entered the name, but the computer made an outraged squeak. “That’s not what it was.”

He pinched his lower lip. “Dixon lives here under the name Parker Wilson. He may have used his alias as a password. Now he typed in ‘PalmerDixon’, but the only answer was another beep. “How about ‘Palmer’? ... No, that’s a no-go... I’m going to try ‘Dixon’.” This time, the beeping stopped and a new window opened. “Ha! Bingo!”

“You’re in, Jupe! You’re in!” cried Bob enthusiastically.

“Shh! Not so loud!”

“Did something happen?” Pete had left his observation post and stood curiously in the doorway to the living room.

“We’re just about to read Dixon’s mail,” explained Jupiter. “Look, here’s a list of the e-mails he’s received. Most of the entries have ‘Melody’ as the sender.

Yesterday was the last one. Let me open it.” Jupiter clicked on the entry and a text appeared on the monitor:

Your carelessness in visiting Dr Arroway’s house in broad daylight led to your discovery. You and your car are being followed. Change the colour of your Ford and spend the next few days in a hotel! The Popol Vuh project is on hold. Wait for further instructions!

Melody.

“I don’t believe it!” gasped Bob. “Dixon’s really been warned!”

“From his mysterious employer, Melody,” Jupiter added.

“But... but how does this Melody know all this?” Pete stammered and looked around involuntarily. “Are we being watched?”

“Looks like it,” Jupe said uneasily. “Or maybe our Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup tripped us up this time and our search request accidentally ended up at Melody’s. Dixon replied to this mail, let’s see what that was.”

Jupiter called up the message:

Melody, thanks for the warning! I will leave immediately. I overheard Dr Arrowway, her assistant and four children during my visit. The Popol Vuh has disappeared! How is that possible? Request further instructions.

Dixon.

“Aha,” mumbled Jupiter. “So Dixon is not the thief.”

“Or else he tries to deceive his client by claiming that the *Popol Vuh* was stolen by someone else,” Bob pondered. “But then the question arises as to what he was doing in Dr Arrowway’s garden.”

Thoughtfully they remained silent for a while.

“I think we should get out of here,” Pete finally said. “The thing about this Melody gives me the creeps. I suddenly feel so watched.”

“Tell me, why are you here?” Jupiter asked. “Shouldn’t you stand by the window and watch the street?”

“Oh,” Pete did. “I’m outta here!”

Suddenly they heard a soft sound.

“Did you hear that?” breathed Bob.

They held their breath. Something creaked.

Pete opened his eyes in horror. “That was the front door! Dixon’s back!”

11. Fear of the Unknown

As quick as lightning, Jupiter jumped up and switched off the monitor. There was no time left to shut down the computer.

In panic, they looked around. To return to the patio door, they had to cross the corridor. But the steps were already approaching in the corridor! Pete pressed himself against the wall next to the door, Jupiter scurried into the shadow of a bookshelf and Bob ducked behind the sofa. A moment later, Dixon entered.

Like the first time, he didn't switch on any light. He threw his jacket on the sofa, tore open a packet of cigarettes and reached for the lighter that lay on the desk. Pete could watch his every move. The small flame seemed to illuminate the room as bright as day, but Dixon had turned his back. Sighing, he lowered himself onto the chair, turned on the monitor—and stopped. For a moment, he stared at the picture—the message he had sent to Melody. Then suddenly he sat stiff as a poker on his chair and turned his head very slowly as if he was searching the room.

“Is anybody here?” His voice was just a hoarse croak. “M... Melody?”

Nobody moved. At any moment, Dixon would turn on the light. At any moment, he would spot them!

“Melody, is that you?” The fear in his voice was unmistakable.

“Listen, I followed your instructions, I spent last night at the hotel, I just came back to see if you sent me another message. I—”

Bob lost his balance in his squatting position and grabbed the back of the sofa. In doing so, he pulled on a blanket lying on top of it. Dixon gasped in shock and groped for the light switch. Then the light from the desk lamp came on. Bob stared at Palmer Dixon in horror.

Dixon was the first to find his voice: “You are... you're Melody?”

“I... uh... no. I am...”

“We are The Three Investigators,” Jupiter intervened and stepped out of the shadows.

Only now did Dixon realize that Bob was not the only stranger in the room, and flinched. He seemed to get smaller and smaller until he

recognized the three of them. Outraged, he stood up. "You... you're the three guys who... I know you! What are you doing here?"

"Where's the *Popol Vuh*?" Pete asked straight out. "And where is Jelena?"

"Sorry? What are you talking about?"

"We know everything, Mr Dixon," claimed Jupiter, although that was not true at all. "Or should I call you Mr Wilson?"

"How did you..." Dixon looked at them in surprise for a moment, then turned around angrily and reached for the phone. "I'm gonna call the police."

Bob and Jupiter looked at each other in amazement. They hadn't expected that.

But Pete said, unmoved: "Good idea. Then you might as well tell the police that you stole the *Popol Vuh* on behalf of Melody and kidnapped Jelena because she was on your tail."

Dixon paused in the movement. Slowly he put down the phone and turned to Pete. "What do you know about Melody?"

"Uh... he's your employer."

"What do you have to do with him?" Dixon asked.

"Nothing. We..." Pete started to say.

"We should sit down quietly and exchange some information," Jupiter suggested. "I think there are some misunderstandings here. On both sides. It's about time we got rid of them."

"So you broke in here because you thought I stole the *Popol Vuh* and had something to do with the disappearance of that girl. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Neither one nor the other is the case."

They sat in Palmer Dixon's living room in the faint glow of the computer monitor, over which a screen saver flickered. Dixon had insisted that the lights be turned off. "We could be seen," he had said.

Whoever this man was and whatever he'd done, one thing was certain—he was very frightened. That's why he had insisted that The Three Investigators begin their story before he told them his.

Jupiter had revealed willingly. After all, they had nothing to lose. "But you were after the *Popol Vuh*, weren't you? Or why else were you in Dr Arroway's garden yesterday?"

"I wanted to look at the house and follow Dr Arroway to find out when is the best time to break in. You're right, I was to steal the *Popol*

Vuh. How surprised do you think I was when I overheard you say that it had already been stolen!”

“Who is Melody?” Jupiter asked.

“I don’t know. I was hoping you could tell me. But now I know that you got into this completely by accident. But maybe I should tell you the story from the beginning.”

“That would be an advantage,” agreed Jupiter, who still wasn’t sure how to assess Dixon.

“All right,” Dixon began. “It started two years ago. I’d done some big stupid things and suddenly I was out of a job. Besides, I had a lot of debts... Gambling debts.” He bowed his head in shame.

“The cruelty of gambling debts is that they multiply. You end up believing the only way to pay it off is to keep playing. After all, a losing streak like that can’t last forever. One day, you have to win the grand prize in order to resolve all your troubles. But the jackpot never came, instead the debt kept getting bigger and bigger and in the end I was in really big trouble.

“My creditors started threatening me and I had to get money—a lot of money urgently—really urgently. So I put advertisements in newspapers offering myself as a worker. ‘Will do anything for the right money,’ I wrote. That was a mistake. Next to my phone number I put my e-mail address.

“A few days later, a certain ‘Melody’ contacted me. He didn’t want to give his real name, but I didn’t care, because he offered me a very lucrative job. He wanted me to go to auctions and buy certain works of art. It sounded like an easy job and I accepted. The money I needed for the auction was transferred to my account, together with a considerable commission. And I sent the auctioned items to a mailbox where Melody picked them up.”

“If you needed money so badly, wasn’t there a temptation to run away with the whole amount?” Bob asked.

“Sure. But Melody threatened me from the beginning. He said I shouldn’t even think about it, he wrote, or I’d get in trouble.”

“What if you had claimed that the price of the object had been higher?” Bob kept thinking. “Then you could have put the difference in your own pocket.”

“When one of my creditors pursued me particularly persistently, I tried,” Dixon confessed. “But Melody found out immediately. The

interesting thing was that, in most cases, Melody knew exactly how high I had to go at the auctions to win the bid.”

“Let me guess,” Jupiter said. “Your most persistent opponent at the auctions was Dr Lou Ann Arroway.”

“Right. Sometimes I felt like Melody was just trying to outdo Dr Arroway. He always knew how high she’d go, so he gave me the opportunity to bid a few dollars over.”

“But it didn’t work with the *Popol Vuh*,” Jupiter noted.

“No. Melody told me I could go as high as twenty-two thousand dollars, but Dr Arroway offered twenty-five thousand and I was out of the race.”

“What did Melody say?” Jupiter asked.

“That things didn’t turn out as planned, but that he absolutely had to have that book.”

“So he ordered you to steal it,” Jupiter surmised.

“Right. At first I refused. After all, there had never been any talk of burglary or theft. Buying art items is one thing, but stealing a book is quite another. But then Melody offered me so much money that I could not say no. I would have got rid of all my debts in one swoop.”

“How much?” Jupiter asked.

“Thirty thousand dollars.”

“Thirty thousand?” cried Pete, gasping for breath.

“But Dr Arroway only paid twenty-five for it!”

“I wondered about that too, but I didn’t care. Melody really wanted the book and was willing to pay me that much money if I got it for him. He knew Dr Arroway wouldn’t be home on Sunday night and instructed me to break-in that night.”

“But then the *Popol Vuh* was stolen the night before,” Jupiter noted and pinched his lower lip. “Very mysterious.”

“How does Melody know so much about Dr Arroway?” Pete wondered. “Who is he? And why is he after her?”

“Dr Arroway himself apparently has no idea either,” said Jupiter. “The only opponent she could think of was you, Mr Dixon.”

“As far as we know so far, there’s really only one person who could have enough information to make this happen,” Bob said.

“Namely who?” Jupiter asked.

“Dr Arroway’s assistant, Janet.”

“Janet?” echoed Jupiter. “You don’t believe that yourself. She’s been working for Dr Arroway for years. Why would she betray her? It doesn’t make sense. Janet goes in and out of her house every day. If she was after the *Popol Vuh*, she could have stolen it herself instead of putting Mr Dixon on it.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right. So there’s only one thing to do. We’re dealing with a complete stranger, someone who obviously has his fingers in every pie.”

“A very dangerous stranger,” Palmer Dixon added, lowering his voice involuntarily. “He is watching me. He knows my every move. He even knew you were looking for my car. This is not right. To be honest, I get the creeps. Melody’s got me in his hands, he knows everything I do.”

“You never saw him before?” Jupiter asked.

“No. Contact was always by e-mail. And money was always transferred to my account.”

“Wait a minute!” Bob said suspiciously. “What was that conversation that Jelena overheard? I thought you were on the phone with him.”

“That was not Melody. I called my last creditor to promise him I’d have the money soon.”

“Very tricky,” said Jupiter, shaking his head. “The puzzles are piling up and we still don’t have a single answer. Who really stole the *Popol Vuh*? And what is so valuable about this book?”

“What do you mean, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“It just occurred to me that it is not very logical to bid so much money for an antique book when the real value estimated by Dr Arroway is just twenty thousand dollars. No, by now I think it’s not the book itself, but something else entirely. Maybe something hidden inside... or what’s inside it.”

“Or it’s not that Melody wants the book, it’s that he doesn’t want Dr Arroway to own it,” continued Bob.

“Interesting theory,” Jupiter remarked. “The only person who can help us on this question is Dr Arroway herself. We’ll ask her tomorrow.”

“And Jelena,” Bob added with concern. “I’m sure she has found out something. Maybe she knows who Melody is and was reckless enough to seek him out.”

“All the threads run together to this mysterious Melody,” Jupiter said. “He seems to be everywhere. We must find out who he is.”

“We have Melody’s e-mail address,” cried Pete. “Doesn’t that help us?”

Bob shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. These addresses are completely anonymous. No one can trace who’s really behind them.”

“Not under normal circumstances,” Jupiter confirmed. “However...”

“However what?” Pete asked.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip and kept silent.

“What? Jupe, tell us.” Pete insisted.

“Fellas, I have an idea! Admittedly a rather complicated idea, but with a little luck it might work.”

“What?”

“We’ll beat Melody at his own game and set a trap for him!”

12. The Trojan Horse

“What kind of trap?” Pete wanted to know.

“Everyone who connects to the Internet has an IP address from his Internet Service Provider for the duration of his stay in the network.”

“What address?” Pete asked.

“An Internet Protocol address. When you surf the Internet, the sites you access must know where to send their information to. That’s what the IP address is for. It has nothing to do with the email address.”

“Uh-huh,” Pete said without understanding. “And?”

“And if we can trace Melody’s IP address, we have a chance of catching him.”

“And how are you gonna do that?” Bob asked.

“I have tried to decipher Melody’s true identity several times,” Mr Dixon interrupted. “Each time without success. You can’t get the IP address that easily.”

“I know it’s not easy,” Jupe replied and smiled knowingly. “Especially for home users, you get a different IP address from your provider every time you connect to them. It’s called a Dynamic IP address. That makes it even more difficult to trace... but it is possible.”

“And how?” Pete asked.

“By giving Melody a little present—a Trojan horse.”

“You still speak in puzzles,” Pete complained. “Could you please try to explain what you’re up to to a moron like me?”

Jupiter sighed. “I want to try it. Do you know the Greek legend of Odysseus and his cunningness in the Trojan War?”

“Heard that before,” Pete said laconically. “But how can a Greek legend help us with our problem?”

“The Greeks besieged the city of Troy for ten years, but they did not manage to get past its walls. Until finally Odysseus played a trick. He ordered a huge wooden horse to be built and placed at the gates of Troy. Then he ordered the Greek troops to leave. The people in the besieged city believed that their opponents had finally given up and that the horse was a kind of appeasing gift. They opened the gates and pulled the horse inside.”

“So?”

“The horse was hollow inside. During the night the soldiers who had hidden in it climbed out, opened the gate from the inside and let the army, which had returned secretly, into the city. Troy was conquered, end of story.”

“Smart plan,” Pete said. “But I still don’t quite understand. Will you also build a wooden horse and send it to Melody?”

Jupiter nodded. “Exactly. A virtual wooden horse. Look, we’re going to send Melody an e-mail. Something quite innocuous. And we’ll attach a little spy program I’ve programmed, the Trojan Horse. Melody will open the email and activate the hidden mini-program.”

“And what does this program do?” asked Mr Dixon curiously.

“It looks for Melody’s IP address and automatically sends it back to us without him noticing anything. It opens the gates of the city for us, so to speak.”

“And then we’ll have the IP address and we can track down Melody!” Pete shouted. “I got it. Brilliant, Jupe!”

“I’m afraid it’s not quite that simple,” contradicted the First Investigator. “Because we can’t do much with the IP address itself yet. It’s just a series of numbers that won’t tell us anything at first.”

“Then what are we supposed to do with it?” Pete asked.

Jupe continued: “From the first few digits of the IP, we can see which Internet Service Provider that Melody uses. And then we have to get to the provider’s user list in which, with a bit of luck, we can also find Melody’s telephone number. The problem with this is that as soon as Melody leaves that Internet session, the IP address expires and would be assigned to someone else at another time. So we can only do something before Melody logs off. If we’re unlucky, we only have a few minutes.”

“Absolutely impossible,” Bob said decided. “You’ll never be able to hack into the provider’s user list. Not even professionals can do that! It’s secured by umpteen layers of security, you need passwords and who knows what to get in there. Maybe you can do it if you have a few days, but in a few minutes? I’m sorry, Jupe, it was a good idea, but I’m afraid you can forget it.”

Jupiter pulled a wry face. “I admit that’s the catch to my plan. But I’m sure I’ll think of something else. I have to try.”

Then Jupiter turned to Mr Dixon and said: “But first, I need to ask you for permission for us to track Melody, as I will need to use your e-mail

address.”

“I guess I have nothing to lose, because I have run out of ideas,” Mr Dixon said, “If you are successful, I could get out of this mess with Melody once and for all.”

“Good,” Jupe said with satisfaction. “Mr Dixon, can you tell me when Melody prefers to send you an e-mail?”

“When? I don’t understand.”

“I mean, what time.”

Dixon frowned. “No specific time, I think. I’ve never paid attention.”

“Did you save his messages?”

“Not all, but the last few weeks I have.”

“That will do.” Jupiter sat down at the computer, which was still on, and called up the mailbox.

Here Melody’s messages were listed, together with the date and time of reception. Jupiter skimmed the list. “Interesting. With a few exceptions, Melody usually sends messages around noon. So we can assume that he sits at his computer and checks if any mail has arrived.”

“Around noon,” Bob repeated. “Then we have a problem. Because tomorrow at noon, we’ll be sitting in school. We’ll miss the moment when the Trojan horse returns to us.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind skipping school for this,” said Pete.

“Unfortunately, I’d be in trouble for it. And I can’t afford trouble with my grades. How about you, Jupe? You’re the only one who can do anything with that weird IP address anyway. And being the biggest brainiac at Rocky Beach High, you don’t mind missing a few classes, do you? You already know everything.”

The First Investigator shook his head. “Skipping school is not an option. There must be another way. Let me do it, I’ll think of something.” He looked at his watch. “It’s 10:30 already. We have to be home in half an hour at the latest. We’d better leave now.”

“Hey! And what about the Trojan horse?” Pete said. “Aren’t you just gonna put that together real quick?”

Jupiter laughed. “You’re joking, Pete. It will take me at least two hours to write and test the program!”

“Two hours?” echo Pete. “That long? I think that would just be a mini-program that is so small that no one would notice.”

“That’s right. Although I know how to do this, but I’ve not done one before,” Jupe said. “It could get a bit complicated, so I’ll do it at

Headquarters. It'll be a long night..."

The Second Investigator frowned. "But... but Mr Dixon's computer is right here!"

"So what?" When Jupe noticed Pete's uncomprehending expression, he rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter what computer I use, Pete, as long as I have Mr Dixon's e-mail address."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'll never understand that. But it doesn't matter. You'll be fine, Jupe."

They said goodbye to Mr Dixon with the promise to inform him as soon as they had found out Melody's identity.

"Until then, it's best to continue to follow his instructions so he doesn't suspect anything," Jupiter said.

"All right." Palmer Dixon looked at them one by one. "I hope you boys are successful. Even if I end up getting in trouble with the police for trying to steal the *Popol Vuh*, I'll be glad when this game of hide-and-seek finally comes to an end."

"I admit that for a long time we were convinced that you were the bad guy," replied Jupiter. "But the fact is that you are not guilty of any crime. After all, a burglary plan is not a crime if you do not put it into practice. No, Melody is the one who will get into trouble with the police. Big trouble, actually. Hopefully it will be tomorrow."

"I wonder if Jelena came home after all," Bob asked anxiously as they drove through the dark night back to the salvage yard. "I think I'll call Mr Charkov's house again, even if it's very late."

"Do you think that's a good idea? Maybe he's asleep," Pete threw in.

"If she's not back yet, he's definitely not asleep," Bob said. "And if she did go to a friend's house, he won't hold it against me."

Jupiter was also worried. He didn't like Jelena very much, that was true, but if something really happened to her... then it's a different story. But the First Investigator kept his thoughts to himself. "In the meantime, I have thought of something how we can go to school tomorrow without worrying about missing anything," he said to distract himself and his friends.

"How?" Pete asked.

"As soon as Melody receives the mail and unknowingly activates the Trojan Horse, it will notify us on our mobile phone."

“Uh-huh,” Pete said with little conviction. “Sure. And by whom?”

“From our computer. I can create a program to send a message to our mobile phone the moment the Trojan horse returns.”

“Now you’re crazy,” Pete was convinced. “I believe that a computer can do a lot of things, but calling? What does it say? ‘Hello, this is your computer speaking. Your Trojan horse has just got back from its walk and got me a great little IP address!’”

“I think Jupiter means more like a text message,” said Bob amused.

“Right, Bob. The program in our computer will send a text message containing Melody’s IP address to our mobile phone as soon as it gets it. Then I just need to get into the school’s computer room as soon as possible to break into the provider.”

Pete still had doubts. “It all sounds so simple. But the real problems always come when you see them.”

“Typical pessimist,” Bob remarked.

When they reached Headquarters, the answering machine was blinking. Mr Charkov had left a message ten minutes earlier. Jelena was still not home. The message put a damper on everyone’s spirits.

“Your plan has to work, Jupe,” Bob said insistently. “If we find Melody, we’ll know what happened to Jelena, I’m one hundred percent sure!”

“It will work,” Jupiter promised and tried not to let his insecurity show.

The idea with the Trojan horse was as brilliant as it was simple. But that was only the first half of the solution. He still had no idea how to get at the provider’s user list. That would be a tough nut to crack. And he only had twelve hours left to develop a plan.

“All right, fellas, before your parents start worrying, you better get home. I’m going to get to work writing the program. You can’t help me with that anyway.”

“Good, Jupe.” Pete raised his index finger threateningly. “And you better do it right with your virtual wooden horse.”

The First Investigator casually waved. “Not to worry. Programming is the easier part of the plan. I still have to figure out what to do after that.”

When Bob and Pete had left, Jupiter stood in front of the desk for a moment and looked at the computer in a challenging way. Here he would spend the next few hours, if he had to, all night. But he was already tired now.

“I’ll get you, Melody,” he murmured. “I’m gonna get you!”

13. The Trap is Sprung

“We’ll get you! We’re gonna get you!” roared his pursuers, laughing maliciously. The laughter echoed down dark corridors.

Jupiter looked around in panic. Dark figures chased him through a black labyrinth. He ran and ran, but the pursuers were faster. Over there! There was the exit! He jumped towards it—and crashed into a gigantic wooden horse. It turned its head and grinned at him. “Now they’ll get you,” it said. And suddenly a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around. Jupiter cried out and tried to break free, but the grip was iron.

“Jupe! Jupe!” That was Aunt Mathilda.

He woke up.

The worried face of his aunt hovered over him. She gently touched his shoulder. “Jupe, I think you’ve overslept... Or are you going straight for the second period today?”

“What? I, uh... no. He tried hard to shake off the nightmare, turning his head towards the alarm clock. It should have rung by now. Either he hadn’t heard it or he forgot to turn it on last night. Last night? It had been only four hours since he had gone to bed. By half past three, he’d been sitting at Headquarters brooding over his Trojan horse program and everything else. It was a miracle that he had still made it to bed and hadn’t fallen asleep at his desk right away.

“Then hurry up! If you skip breakfast, you can still make it on time.”

“Breakfast?” he murmured. He was still not quite awake.

“Believe me, it doesn’t harm you to skip a meal,” Aunt Mathilda reassured him. “Now get out of bed!”

Jupiter entered the classroom punctually with the school bell.

He almost forgot the mobile phone, the most important piece of equipment of all. In the first few hours, he kept fumbling around with it to make sure it was really there. He had turned off the ringing. When the phone received the text, it would vibrate instead.

Seldom was Jupiter so inattentive in class as this morning. He was far too nervous to listen to the boring talk of the teachers. At every break, he met Bob and Pete, who were in a different class, in the corridor.

“So?” Pete asked.

“Nothing yet,” Jupe murmured.

Then, in the middle of the fifth period—English with Mrs Cheeseman—the phone was vibrating in his pocket. Jupiter sat up straight as a candle, electrified. He raised his hand.

“Yes, Jupiter?”

“I have to go to the bathroom, Mrs Cheeseman.”

She looked at him reproachfully. “Don’t you ever think of this during recess?” Then she nodded at him.

Jupiter got up and rushed to the door, which caused giggles in the class. In the corridor, he started running. He ran to the toilet, locked himself in a stall and pulled out the mobile phone. With nimble fingers, he called up the message. There it was—Melody’s twelve-digit IP address!

He had opened the mail that Jupiter had sent him last night on behalf of Mr Dixon and let the Trojan horse in with it without realizing it. The trap was sprung!

Jupiter noted down the number, then pulled a piece of paper from his trousers pocket and unfolded it. Before he fell into bed dead tired yesterday, he had written down all the important Internet Service Providers, including their range of IP addresses. He compared the first digits of the IP with those on the list. There it was—Melody’s Internet Service Provider was the company Datacom. Jupiter had racked his brains as to how he was going to succeed in penetrating a secure computer without any hacker experience.

Bob was right. It was almost impossible. So he had only one option—he had to cook up a huge story.

Jupiter switched on the mobile phone and dialled the phone number of Datacom, which he had wisely noted down earlier in his list of providers. Nervously, he waited for someone to answer.

“Welcome to Datacom,” said a friendly voice from a recording. “We are sorry, all our lines are busy at the moment. Do not hang up! You will be served shortly.”

Jupiter moaned while some Beatles song was played to keep the callers in the waiting loop happy. He didn’t have time for the queue.

“Welcome to Datacom. We are sorry, all our lines are busy at the moment. Do not hang up! You will be served shortly.”

“Yes, I know!” Jupiter hissed angrily.

He waited a beaten two minutes that seemed like an eternity. Then he was finally put through.

“Datacom, good afternoon, my name is Shirley Keaton, what can I do for you?”

“Sorry, Shirley,” Jupiter thought to himself. “Unfortunately, you have to endure quite a bit now. But there’s no other way.” Then he lowered his voice and started: “It is a bottomless impudence to make me wait so long! We have an emergency here! I need an identification from your user list now!”

“Excuse me, who is this?”

“Jones from Jones & Company in Rocky Beach! We have had the pleasure of meeting you several times!”

“I’m sorry, sir, but it appears you were talking to a colleague. May I ask who with?”

“You mustn’t, honey!” yelled Jupiter. “I’m getting tired of being connected to someone else all the time and telling the story all over again! We have an emergency here, a hacker attack! I have his IP address, he’s on the Internet through Datacom. Check the user list right now!”

“Sir, I am really sincerely sorry, but the data from the user list is subject to data protection! We can’t just check an IP address for you.”

“I know!” yelled Jupiter. “We’ve been through all this before! Listen, this is the fourth time I’ve called you! Fourth time! Each time, it took me half an eternity to get through to your top boss, who finally gave permission to go through the user list! And each time it was too late and the hacker had logged off! So I would be very grateful if you could shorten the procedure this time and check the list immediately!”

Shirley got insecure. “I can’t do this so easily, I’ve got to get an approval first—”

“Get approval, I know! My dear Shirley, I’m getting information stolen here. Valuable data. Some Internet criminal has penetrated my company’s computer system and has access to all the secret information! Every minute you let pass costs me thousands of dollars. And I’m not going to blame Datacom. I’m going to blame you personally. Do you understand me?”

Shirley was silent.

“Damn it! Are you there?”

“One moment, please.” It clicked on the line and Jupiter was back on hold.

Now it was over! Shirley would call the boss of Datacom, who of course had never heard of Jones & Company... Or even worse, she would put Jupiter through to him immediately. While Jupiter waited, the Beatles assured him that ‘there will be an answer, let it be...’. His back was sweating. Then it clicked again.

“Mr Jones?”

“Yeah?”

“If I check the user list myself, it will cost me my job. If I give you the access code for the list, it will also cost me my job, but it will be less noticeable. So nobody must know about it! Do you understand me?”

“Absolutely,” replied Jupiter perplexed.

“With the code, you can check the list yourself. I hope you don’t have the idea of abusing it. Just to let you know, the codes are changed every hour.”

“I have no intention of abusing it.”

“I wanted to hear that. Do you have something to write on?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She gave him a combination of numbers. “Never say a word to anyone, understand?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Jupiter switched off the mobile phone and breathed again. He had the secret code for the user list. Now he only needed a computer! He ripped open the door and fell out of the stall.

The computer room was in the basement of the school. The First Investigator ran down the corridor to the stairs, stumbled down and prayed that the room was not locked. Without knocking, he pushed the door handle down. The door swung open. The computer room was full of students sitting and working on the computers. There was a class in here taking a computer science lesson. Everyone looked up and stared at him.

“Jupe! What are you doing here?” Bob called out. Pete was also in the same class.

“No time to explain! I need to get to a computer!”

“What’s going on?” A stern looking teacher had appeared beside them out of nowhere.

“I’m sorry, Mr Kent, but this is an emergency!” Jupiter sat down at the nearest available monitor and started hacking away at the keyboard.

“Jupiter Jones,” said Mr Kent in outrage. “Could you explain to me what this means? Why aren’t you in your class?”

The First Investigator did not answer.

“If I’m not mistaken, you should be in another class right now! How dare you barge in here and disrupt my class!”

Meanwhile all the other students had left their seats and were looking curiously over Jupiter’s shoulder.

“Please, Mr Kent, I just need two minutes, then I’ll be gone! I’ll explain later!”

“What’s wrong, Jupe?” Pete asked excitedly. “Do you have Melody?”

“Not quite yet. But soon. Provided he’s still logged on to the Internet.”

“Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews! Back to your seats! And everybody else! Faster, if you please.” Hesitantly, the students returned to their seats.

“And as for you, Jupiter Jones, I hope your explanation is good. So good that it convinces me not to report your behaviour to the director.”

Jupiter knew that there would be tremendous trouble, but he could not take that into account now. In the meantime, he had logged on to Datacom. Feverishly he searched for an access to the user list. Finally the computer asked him to enter the secret code. He fished the note from his pocket and entered the combination.

“What are you doing?” Mr Kent asked, puzzled. “An access code for Datacom? Where did you get it?”

“Top secret,” Jupiter replied curtly. Then the list appeared before him. It was an endless series of numbers. Everyone who was on the Internet via Datacom at that moment was listed here with their IP address, the exact time they logged on and their telephone number!

Since Mr Kent was now staring at the monitor with equal fascination and had apparently forgotten his students for the moment, Bob and Pete had got up again to follow the action.

The First Investigator used the search function and typed in the IP address.

“There it is!” cried Jupiter. “Melody has been on the Internet for exactly twenty-one minutes! And here we have his phone number!” Before it could disappear at the last second, he quickly wrote it down.

“My goodness!” gasped Bob. “I recognize that number!”

“What?” cried Pete. “From where?”

“That number there,” Bob said, stunned, “is Dr Arroway’s phone number!”

14. The Search for Clues

“There will be some trouble with Mr Kent,” Pete said when they met in the school yard at the next break. “I don’t think he likes me anyway. Now, of course, he has a reason to really get me into trouble. But what can I do if you suddenly barge into our class?”

“You’ll get into trouble with him too, Jupe,” Bob warned. “He said: ‘And as for Jupiter Jones, he shouldn’t think that I’m going to let him get away with this impertinent behaviour because he’s a good student.’ So beware!”

Jupiter waved him off. “The worst thing that can happen to me is a conversation with the director. I’ll survive that. More importantly, it worked! We got Melody!”

“So Dr Arroway is behind the whole thing,” Pete summed up. “Maybe I’m too stupid to understand half of it, but can anyone explain to me how it all fits together? It doesn’t make any sense! Why would she hire Palmer Dixon to bid against her at auctions? After all, it’s costing her a bundle.”

“I’ve been thinking about it too,” Bob said. “I only came up with one motive. It gives her greater control over the course of the auction, and possibly intimidates other competitors. But unfortunately it’s not really logical, because as you said, she’ll still have to pay higher price for the items, there’s no way around it.”

“So it’s not about money for her, but something else,” Jupe said. “Perhaps it’s important to her that no one knows that she is the true owner of the items. She wants to deceive someone for whatever reason.”

“But then she wouldn’t have to appear at the auctions herself,” Bob interjected. “It would be enough if she just sent Dixon.”

“If she appears herself, bids and leaves the hall as a frustrated loser, it is more credible,” Jupiter contradicted.

“And how does the theft of the *Popol Vuh* fit in?” Bob frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Perhaps Dr Arroway wanted someone to believe that the book had been stolen for some reason,” Jupiter said. “To make the deception as real as possible, she hires the ignorant Mr Dixon to break into her house. What

she didn't count on, though, is Jelena's phone tapping and us showing up. She knew we'd try to stop the theft the following night. So she quickly made the *Popol Vuh* disappear herself. After all, she could be sure that we would never suspect her. She alerted Palmer Dixon by e-mail in a timely manner, since, of course, she didn't want us to track him down."

"And Jelena got wise to her," Bob continued. "She went to her house yesterday and confronted her. But Dr Arroway is more ruthless than she thought. Instead of backing down, she took Jelena prisoner."

"Sounds logical," Pete admitted. "But what's the point? Who is Dr Arroway trying to fool, and why?"

"This is the unsolved mystery. I'm sure it has something to do with the *Popol Vuh*. The book is the key to this case."

"So what do we do now?" Bob wanted to know.

"We're going to check out Dr Arroway," the First Investigator decided. "She said she is always at the university until late afternoon. The best thing is for the two of you to go straight to her place after school. Search the house, rummage through her papers, there must be a clue somewhere! You might even find Jelena."

The bell interrupted the discussion.

"And what about you?" Bob asked.

"I will follow as soon as I can," promised Jupiter. "Stupidly, I firmly promised Aunt Mathilda I'd cover for her at the salvage yard for an hour today. She has a doctor's appointment and Uncle Titus isn't there."

"Stupid," Pete moaned. "Can't she postpone the appointment?"

"She can't. And I can't leave the salvage yard unattended. But I'll hurry as soon as she gets back!"

The Three Investigators trotted across the school yard back to their classes.

In retrospect, Jupiter thought that it wouldn't have done any harm to close the salvage yard for an hour. He only made a few dollars in sales and on top of that he was annoyed not to be with Bob and Pete while they were probably making the most exciting discoveries at that moment. He was doomed to stand here and wait for customers who didn't show up.

He looked at his watch. Aunt Mathilda had now been gone for almost an hour. How long would the lectures at the university last? He wondered if Dr Arroway was on her way home. Fortunately, there was so much traffic on the streets at this time of day that it could easily take an hour by

car from Los Angeles to Rocky Beach. This could give Bob and Pete a little more time.

Jupe heard a distant ringing—the phone! It must have been Bob and Pete who wanted to report their findings! The First Investigator ran across the dusty place to the trailer, ripped open the door and picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking!”

“Jupiter, it’s Mr Charkov!” He sounded very excited. “Something terrible has happened, I don’t know how to help myself anymore!”

“What happened, Mr Charkov? Is it about Jelena?”

“She’s been kidnapped!”

“You mean she hasn’t come back yet?”

“Not only that. I got... I got a letter today. An anonymous letter. From her kidnapper. Cut out of newspaper letters.”

“Excuse me?” Jupiter felt fear rise up inside him. Kidnapped! They had suspected it themselves, but secretly Jupiter had hoped all along that there was a simple explanation for Jelena’s disappearance.

“It says not to call the police under any circumstances,” Mr Charkov stammered. “I... I don’t know what to do! What am I going to do now?”

“You have to inform the police,” Jupiter said. “Absolutely! A kidnapping is not to be trifled with!”

“But it says that he will harm Jelena if I don’t keep quiet!” Mr Charkov shouted angrily. His Russian accent was now so strong that Jupiter hardly understood anything. “I don’t know whom to turn to. Your friends and you, Jupiter, you are detectives after all! Can’t you... please help me! Help my daughter!”

“I...” Jupiter didn’t know what to say. How could he reassure this man? How could he convince him that kidnapping was out of their league? “I’m coming over,” he finally said. “Right now. Please stay calm and do nothing for now. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Thank you, Jupiter!”

The First Investigator hung up. Now his friends had to get along without him. He hoped they wouldn’t do anything stupid! But Mr Charkov was more important now. If Jupiter wanted to prevent the poor man from collapsing completely, he now had to stand by him. He wrote a short message to Bob and Pete and left it on the desk.

“Jupiter Jones! You’re supposed to guard the salvage yard, not hide in your trailer.” Aunt Mathilda just came through the gate with energetic steps.

“It was only a very short phone call,” Jupe assured her. “Good that you’re back, Aunt Mathilda! I have to leave immediately!”

“Is there anything going on?” his aunt asked.

“No, no.” Jupiter unlocked his bike, jumped on the saddle and started cycling.

“I’ll be back for dinner!”

“Yes!”

“She is not here,” Bob observed as they reached Dr Arroyo’s house.

“Janet’s car is also not here. What luck!”

“Hopefully she’ll stay away for a while,” Pete said. “I don’t want to be caught snooping around other people’s houses again. Last night was quite enough for me.”

“I’m sure we’ve got an hour to go,” Bob said confidently. “And by then we’ll have found evidence to nail her with.”

“Let’s hope so.”

It was no problem for Pete to pick the front door lock. This time they did not have to fear being watched. Oak Road was completely deserted.

Before they went into Dr Arroyo’s study, they crept through the whole house once to make sure that nobody was there. Bob went down into the basement. Secretly, he had hoped to find Jelena here, but the few rooms had only shelves with wine bottles and canned food and a few moving boxes. Curiously he opened them and took a look inside. But instead of the suspected art objects Dr Arroyo hid here, the boxes contained only stacks of books and clothes. Bob returned disappointed. He met Pete in the study. Puzzled, they stood in front of the crowded desk and looked around.

“Where do you start here?” Pete thought aloud. “If we go through all that, it will take us until tomorrow.”

“She must have taken notes somewhere,” Bob said.

“On the computer, probably.”

“All right,” Bob said. “I’ll sit at the computer and go through her files, you take care of the rest.”

Pete looked through the books that were on the desk. Most of them were about the culture of the Maya peoples, some were ancient Spanish writings that he could not read.

There were dictionaries, maps of South America and folders full of handwritten notes, plans of old Maya sites, travel reports and loose photos.

“It all looks quite normal,” murmured the Second Investigator. “Apart from her work, I don’t feel like Dr Arrowway has anything to hide.”

“What a bummer!” mumbled Bob. “I can’t access her files, I don’t have the access code!”

“Have you tried *Popol Vuh*?”

“Yes,” Bob replied. “And with everything else I could think of. Nothing fits.”

“If only Jupiter were here. I’m sure he’d come up with the right password,” Pete remarked. “He’s really good at this kind of thing.”

Bob kept trying for a while, but after twenty minutes, he gave up in frustration, turned off the computer and helped Pete search through the documents. “We have to find something! No one can live a double life for years without leaving a trace!”

“You’re right. I have something interesting here.” Pete held up a book.

“What is that?”

“This is a book on steganography,” Pete said.

“What? What is that?” Bob asked.

“The book here says that it is the practice of concealing messages or information within other visible text!” Pete cried. “I never knew that there was a term for that, but it basically includes hidden writings using invisible ink! Just like Jelena’s magic pens! This book contains a thousand traditional and brand-new methods of making invisible ink and making it visible again, from lemon juice over a candle flame to the most complicated chemical experiments. What does this have to do with her cultural historian work?”

“Perhaps a hobby of hers,” Bob pondered, but took the book curiously.

The two detectives developed a new strategy. They no longer looked for documents that had something to do with the *Popol Vuh*, but for records that dealt with something completely different.

Soon Bob found what he was looking for. “Here’s something else—a stack of chemistry books... And a volume on sunken cities and lost treasures and stuff. Dr Arrowway had bookmarked many pages and highlighted paragraphs on them.”

“What?”

“It’s about an old legend that speaks of a Maya cemetery in Guatemala. The locals still talk about this place today, although it has never been found and it is not certain that it ever existed. Sounds all very vague and fantastic. It doesn’t fit at all with the other books here.”

“Do you think she’s looking for this cemetery?”

Bob started to answer, but paused. He had heard something. “I hear a car coming,” he whispered.

Pete ran to the window and peered out carefully. “Dr Arroway! She’s coming back!” He quickly glanced at the desk, and nothing on it looked the same as it did an hour ago. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing at all,” Bob replied after some hesitation.

“But she will notice at once that someone was here! Look at the mess we made!” Pete cried.

“The main thing she’ll notice is that we won’t be hiding.”

“What?”

“No. We know her secret. She’s Melody,” Bob said. “And she’s gonna tell us what it all means.”

They heard the door of the car slammed shut.

“Don’t you think we should wait until Jupe comes?” Pete asked.

“Too late. But don’t worry, we can handle Dr Arroway ourselves,” Bob said.

15. The Secret of the Sacred Book

Mr Charkov was already in the doorway when Jupiter rode his bicycle into the courtyard of the mansion. He was obviously waiting for him.

“Good that you’ve come, Jupiter!”

When the First Investigator approached, he saw that Charkov’s face was almost as pale as his white beard. Dark rings were visible under his eyes. Clearly, he hadn’t slept a wink.

“We’ll do what we can, Mr Charkov.”

“Come in, come in!” He led the First Investigator through the fancy house and into the kitchen.

“Here is the letter,” Mr Charkov pointed to the letter on the table. It was a white sheet of paper, pasted with letters cut out of newspaper headlines. “Oh, what am I going to do, Jupiter? I can’t inform the police, but I can’t just sit back and wait.”

“Let me see,” Jupiter said and sat down at the table to read the letter:

I kidnapped your daughter! She’s fine. If you want her to stay that way, don’t call the police! Or you’ll never see Jelena again. No police! Wait for further instructions.

Underneath the message was a dark blond strand of hair attached with an adhesive strip.

“Jelena’s?” Jupiter inquired and pointed to the hair.

Mr Charkov nodded sadly. “What does this tell you, Jupiter? This guy is serious, isn’t he?”

Jupiter hesitated. “Not much is written in the letter. Did it come in the mail?”

“No. It was in the mailbox just outside the gate. There is no stamp or postmark.”

“So the kidnapper brought the letter personally. Have you talked to the neighbours yet?”

Charkov nodded. "No one has seen anyone. It must have been last night, because I found the letter very early this morning."

"Someone is in a great hurry," Jupiter noted. "Normally, kidnappers let their victims' relatives hang around for a few days to demonstrate how serious they are. Only then do they send a blackmail letter. But this kidnapper seems to be mainly concerned that you don't call the police. He obviously doesn't feel very safe. That could be a good sign. An insecure criminal makes mistakes."

"Or is overly cautious," Mr Charkov interjected.

Jupiter picked up a pen that was lying on the table and played around with it. He read the letter a second time.

And a third time. There was this phrase—the last sentence—"Wait for further instructions". Palmer Dixon had received exactly the same words from Melody two days ago. Jupiter thought this was more than a coincidence, but he didn't want to give Mr Charkov any hopes that he might not be able to fulfil in the end. What if Jelena's abduction was a stupid coincidence and had no connection to Melody and the *Popol Vuh*?

Jupiter would have loved to leave immediately and go to Pete and Bob. But then he called himself to order. The two could take care of themselves. It wouldn't have done any good to help them search the house. Here, on the other hand, there was a new piece of evidence, a new lead that he could pursue further—the kidnapper's letter.

Jupiter made a decision. "I have something to tell you, Mr Charkov."

Jelena's father listened. "What?"

"My friends and I are currently working on a case that Jelena has brought us. In itself, it was completely harmless, but we suspect that your daughter has continued to investigate on her own initiative and has gone one step too far."

"What are you talking about? I don't know anything about that!"

Jupiter tried to explain to him in a few words what it was all about. "Bob and Pete are with the prime suspect right now. She may have kidnapped Jelena. I emphasize, possibly! If so, then she is not holding her in her house, because otherwise Bob and Pete would have freed her long ago. And I assume that in this case Jelena would have called you immediately. But we can still find out if Dr Arroway, our suspect, is the kidnapper."

"How?"

Jupiter tapped on the letter. “As Bob and Pete searched through her waste basket, and if she’s behind this, they’ll probably find chopped up newspapers.”

“What are you waiting for?” Mr Charkov asked excitedly. “Call there right now!”

“It’s not that easy. If Bob and Pete are still alone, they won’t answer the phone. I could leave a message on her answering machine, hoping they’d catch it. But maybe Dr Arroway’s already home, and then I might give them up.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. “Wait.” He stood up and reached for the telephone hanging on the wall.

“I will call the university to see if Dr Arroway is still there.”

Mr Charkov nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Jupiter dialled the information number. “I need the number of the University of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural History, if there is such a thing.”

It took a while, then it clicked and he got the phone number. Jupiter reached for a pen and a notepad to write it down. But the pen did not make any marks on the paper. Irritated, he ran his pen a few times across the paper, but the paper remained white.

“Is that Jelena’s pen?” he asked, showing it to Mr Charkov.

“Yes, her invention, of which she was so proud. She put her secret ink in all kinds of felt-tip pens and spread it all over the house. You need the revealing pen. Anyway, I give you a normal pen. Wait!” Mr Charkov reached for another pen and handed it to Jupiter.

As Jupiter wrote Dr Arroway’s number down, he thought back to Jelena’s proud presentation of her so-called invention. What had she said back then? She would always carry a secret pen with her—for emergencies.

The First Investigator winced. “The letter!” he shouted. “Where is the kidnapper’s letter?”

“Here. What’s wrong, Jupiter?”

“I just had an idea. Can you give me one of Jelena’s revealing pens? There is a slim chance that...”

He began to hatch the slip of paper with the letters glued on it. Nothing happened. No hidden message. Disappointed, Jupiter lowered his shoulders. “It could have been a clue.”

Without much hope, he tried the felt pen on the envelope as well. Some writing was becoming visible!

“Oh, my goodness!” gasped Jupiter. “That was Jelena! She must have got to the envelope unnoticed before the kidnapper delivered it here. And then she wrote an invisible message on it with the secret ink, hoping we’d discover it!”

“What does it say?” asked Mr Charkov excitedly.

“Just a minute, here we go.” Jupiter generously hatched the entire envelope. It was just one word, written in big, clear letters.

“Mr Charkov, we were wrong all along. I now know where your daughter is.”

Dr Arroway startled when she entered the study and saw Bob and Pete. “Goodness, you frightened me!” she gasped. “How did you get in here? Was Janet here to let you in?”

“No,” Bob replied coolly. “We got in by ourselves.”

“By yourselves? How then?”

Pete pulled out his lock pick case and held it under her nose. “With this.”

“You broke into my house?” she asked in surprise. Then she saw the confusion on the desk and the amazement turned into indignation. “What is the meaning of this?”

“It was no problem at all to break into your front door,” Pete evaded. “The thief of the *Popol Vuh* would have had an easy job. If there had been a thief, wouldn’t it?”

“But there never was,” continued Bob. “You yourself made the book disappear.”

“Sorry? What are you talking about, boy?”

“Then you set us up, made it look like Palmer Dixon was the perpetrator. In fact, he’s been working for you this entire time without even knowing it.”

“Palmer Dixon?” cried Dr Arroway, in an incredulous and angry way.

“Listen, you two, if this is a joke, I don’t think it’s funny! And if you want to use this show to hide the fact that you are still in the dark, save yourself the trouble. I don’t hold it against you. It was a bad idea from the start, letting you three and this girl in on this. I should have called the police. And that’s exactly what I’m gonna do if you don’t tell me right now what’s got into you!”

“You... you want to call the police?” Pete asked, unsettled.

The situation got away from them. Dr Arrowway's reaction was not what they expected, and it seemed to point to a huge misunderstanding. Something had gone terribly wrong.

"For sure," Dr Arrowway said. "Finally, I have a theft to report. And I've just caught two burglars red-handed."

"I'm sure the police will be interested to know that you've been doing a secret business for two years," Bob made one last attempt, "under the alias Melody."

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Dr Arrowway irritably. "I've had just about enough of this."

"You didn't tell us the truth," Bob insisted. "You never cared about the *Popol Vuh* itself, did you? You didn't want to re-translate the book. You were looking for something in it. A hidden script or message."

That shot hit the mark. Dr Arrowway froze and looked at Bob with eyes wide open. "How do you know about that?"

"We just know." Bob took another shot. "And we also know of the tomb."

Another hit. Now she turned pale. "Who told you about that?"

"Nobody," Bob said. "We figured it out ourselves. What's the real deal with the *Popol Vuh*?"

"How did you find out?" she asked angrily.

"Tell us your secrets and we'll tell you ours," Bob demanded.

Dr Arrowway frowned at him for a while, then she nodded. "All right."

She sat down on the edge of her desk, lowered her head and continued: "The K'iche' people, whose culture I have been studying for years, ruled the highlands of Guatemala for centuries. They are one of the Maya peoples. There are many legends about this mysterious people, including a saintly tomb where many of their kings were buried. However, this tomb has never been found and most historians and archaeologists now consider it a fairy tale. But during my research, I have repeatedly found evidence that the cemetery does exist. None of the old writings, however, clearly showed where it is exactly located. The highlands of Guatemala are huge and impassable. Large parts are still completely unexplored, so it could be anywhere.

"It was last year when I found a reference in a document that Bernardino de Valencia, one of the translators of the *Popol Vuh*, knew the exact location of the tomb. It is said that he indicated the hiding place in his translation in code. So I did my best to get the book. If I could find the

cemetery from this book, it would be a tremendous archaeological discovery!”

“That’s why the book was worth so much to you!” Pete was fascinated. “But hasn’t it been read and examined dozens of times? If there’s a message hiding there, surely it would have been found by now.”

“You would think so,” said Dr Arroway with a smile. “But in the document I spoke of, there was talk of a hidden message. What hardly anyone knows is that Bernardino de Valencia, besides being a priest and translator, was also an enthusiastic scientist.

“This was very unusual for that time. He spent a lot of time studying chemistry. I believe that the reference is to be taken literally. The message is not only hidden in his translation, but it is actually invisible! A map of the cemetery drawn with some kind of invisible ink. That’s why it was so important that I get the original translation, not just a copy or transcription.”

Bob had immediately caught the adventure fever—a lost Maya cemetery! “But why did you keep all this a secret?”

Dr Arroway laughed. “The world is full of bad people. If my discovery had been made public, I would have been in trouble before I could even blink. I was determined not to go public until I had actually found the tomb.”

“And have you had any success in examining the book?” Pete asked curiously.

“A little. I think I know by now what kind of secret ink Bernardino de Valencia used at that time. It’s just not so easy to make it visible again after so long. The paper is hundreds of years old, I can’t just randomly experiment with it without destroying it. First I have to find out on which pages the invisible message could be hidden. That’s what I’ve been spending the last few weeks on.”

She stood up and gave Bob and Pete a challenging look. “That was my part of the deal. Now you know the secret of *Popol Vuh*. And now tell me—what are you up to? What are you doing with Palmer Dixon, who is Melody and why do you suspect me?”

Pete looked over at Bob unsteadily. Neither of them could believe anymore that Dr Arroway was really behind all this. They were mistaken. Bob hesitantly began his report. The more he told of their research and discoveries, the wider Dr Arroway’s eyes became.

“And the phone number listed in the Internet Service Provider’s user list was yours. So we assumed that you were Melody.”

“Yes,” Dr Arroway replied gloomily. “There is another possible candidate—the only other person who knows about the secret of *Popol Vuh* besides me. The person who could have known in advance how much I would bid for the book at the auction, and how much I was willing to spend on all the other art treasures in the past. The only person I’ve trusted completely for years.” She turned her gaze to the small, unoccupied desk in the other corner of the room...

Janet’s desk.

16. Trapped in the Basement

Jupiter had thought long and hard about how he should proceed. Inform Bob and Pete? Call the police? But he had already made too many mistakes during the investigation of this case.

What if he was wrong again in the end and the name on the envelope was a stupid coincidence? What if Dr Arroway's assistant was innocent and he followed another wrong track? No, before he upset the apple cart, he wanted to convince himself of his suspicions. So he had asked Mr Charkov to do nothing for the moment and wait for his return or a phone call. Then he had looked up Janet's address in the phone book, got on his bicycle and went to Santa Monica, where Dr Arroway's assistant lived.

The house was small and simple. Nevertheless, Jupiter wondered how a simple assistant scientist could afford a house of her own from what was probably a modest salary.

He locked his bike to a lamp post, walked towards the door and rang the bell. Nothing moved. He rang the doorbell again, waited a minute—but nobody seemed to be at home. All the better. If Jelena was here, he preferred to free her undisturbed. But first he had to get into the house somehow.

He was lucky. On the right wall, a window was not completely closed. "Very careless of you, Janet," muttered Jupiter, while he looked around and finally opened the window completely to climb through. Clumsily, he landed with a thud in her bedroom. He listened for a moment. Nothing could be heard. He looked around. It was a normal bedroom. Nothing suggested that a woman lived here who had fraudulently acquired countless art treasures, and a criminal who was not afraid to kidnap a girl.

The First Investigator listened at the door before opening it and stepping into the small corridor. A moment later, he saw his suspicions confirmed. Under the stairs leading to the upper floor was a collapsed wheelchair. Jelena was here! He pondered for a moment. Where in this house would she keep someone who was dependent on a wheelchair?

Jupiter opened the basement door. A steep concrete staircase led into the dark. He searched for a light switch, but found none. In a small niche

in the wall was a flashlight. He switched it on and climbed down. A long, dark corridor followed the stairs. There were only a few doors that diverged from it.

“Jelena?” Jupiter’s call echoed eerily from the bare walls.

For a moment there was silence, then someone answered: “I am here!”

The voice came from the door at the end of the corridor. Jupiter walked towards it. It was a simple but robust wooden door with a heavy steel bolt secured by a padlock. The key was in place. Janet probably hadn’t expected that suspicion could ever fall on her. Jupiter opened the lock, took it off and pulled open the squeaking door.

Behind it was a bare basement room, illuminated only by the dull glow of a candle. On a mattress lying on the floor sat Jelena. She was pale, looked frightened and blinked uncertainly against the light of the flashlight.

The First Investigator directed the beam at himself.

“Jupiter?”

“Yes, it’s me. Jupiter Jones rescues Jelena Charkova from captivity. You never expected this in your life, did you? Is everything okay?”

“I am sitting in a cold, dark basement hole with nothing but a candle and a mattress for company and my wheelchair is gone,” Jelena summarized bitterly. “And you ask if everything is alright. Sure, sure, I’m perfectly fine, come on in, may I offer you something?”

“Since you haven’t lost your sarcasm, you can’t be too bad,” Jupiter said. “But I suggest we continue this discussion after we get out of here.”

“That’s the first sensible thing I’ve heard you say.”

Jupiter entered the room. He bent down to help Jelena up.

Suddenly she looked over his shoulder with widened eyes. “Jupiter! Look out!”

The First Investigator whirled around. A shadow had appeared behind him. Something swooped down and hit him on the head.

But the dull pain lasted only a second before it was swallowed by darkness.

Jelena’s voice drilled into his brain like an acoustic headache. She talked to him, but he did not understand what she was saying. Only slowly did his thoughts become clear. He had not been unconscious for long, he felt it, but the blow on his head had left a mighty bump. If only Jelena would stop talking!

“I’m awake,” he muttered, so she would finally be at peace.

Then he tried to open his eyes, but immediately everything started spinning, so he quickly closed them again. “What happened?”

Slowly, Jelena’s words began to make sense. “Janet showed up. That was a truly excellent rescue, Jupiter. Couldn’t you have checked to see if anyone was in the house before you came?”

“She didn’t answer the doorbell.”

“Because she saw you from the window and guessed why you were here,” Jelena explained angrily. “So she hid and followed you into the basement. Now the two of us are stuck here. Great!”

Accusations. Nothing but reproaches. That was the last thing Jupiter needed. He tried to open his eyes again. This time, the basement room was off the merry-go-round. He looked up at the ceiling. His head lay on the mattress. Jelena squatted next to him.

“Why are you doing this?” he moaned.

“What?”

“Why are you messing with me again? I tried to free you after all!”

“Right. And you were too stupid... or too smug. In your merciless arrogance, of course, you never thought that Janet or anyone else could be smarter than you. After all, you are the infallible First Investigator Jupiter Jones. And what’s the end of the song? You get hit over the head and locked up. A great plan!”

“Yours wasn’t any better either,” Jupiter responded angrily. “You went to Janet and confronted her. Of course, you never dreamed that she might not like it and that she might lock you up. Isn’t that what happened?”

Jelena was silent for a while. “Yes, that’s how it was,” she admitted sheepishly. “Something like that, at least.”

Jupiter tried to sit up. His head immediately began to throb, but he wanted to sit opposite Jelena and not lie next to her. Groaning he slipped into a reasonably comfortable position and groped carefully over the bump. “How did you suspect her? That Janet was the culprit, I mean?”

“That was not difficult at all,” Jelena explained pompously.

“I just watched her closely, that’s all. She gave herself away.”

“How? And when?”

“When Palmer Dixon appeared in Dr Arroway’s garden, Pete wanted to chase him and ran to the window. There he collided with Janet. That

was no accident. She was trying to stop him from climbing out, you could see that right away. You all just weren't paying attention.

"And then there was her strange behaviour when you started the Hookup thing. Do you remember that? Instead of participating in the Hookup, she was suddenly in a terrible hurry to get to the computer. She said she had some work to do. It was a very revealing thing to say in that situation! Then I took a look at her screen. She was about to send someone an e-mail, but I couldn't read it, but I sensed that it had nothing to do with work. She was trying to warn someone!"

"And why didn't you tell us about your observations?"

She pulled a wry face. "You're still asking? You haven't told me everything."

"And there you wanted to prove to us that you could do it on your own," Jupiter concluded reproachfully. "Very careless of you!"

"I admit I should have taken more precautions. But who knew Janet would go crazy, drag me out of my wheelchair and lock me in the basement!"

"How did you actually manage to put her name on the envelope?"

"Oh, you found the message? I didn't expect that."

"I discovered your invisible message when I went to see your father today."

"Janet thought it would be enough to take my wheelchair away and put me in the basement. She hadn't locked the door because she couldn't imagine that a paraplegic girl could still move around and even climb stairs, even if it was a bit cumbersome. I crawled upstairs and looked for a telephone, but she probably only has a mobile phone. Then I saw the blackmail note on the table. Of course, I had my secret pen with me and I quickly wrote her name on it. Then I tried to escape, but just outside the door she spotted me and dragged me back down. Don't tell me you wouldn't have known where I was without the message on the envelope."

Jupiter shook his head. "We suspected Dr Arroway all along."

"Dr Arroway? What kind of stupid idea is that?"

Jupiter told her about her encounter with Palmer Dixon and the Trojan horse.

"With a little power of deduction you could have come to the right solution faster," Jelena said disparagingly.

Jupiter snorted angrily. "You see! That's what I mean! You're doing it again!"

“What am I doing now?”

“You’re putting me down! At every opportunity! What have I done to you? Why do you despise me so much?”

“Me despise you?” Jelena laughed. “You must be joking! You are the one who despises me, Jupiter Jones! From the very first day! Since we met, you haven’t taken me seriously for a second.”

“That’s not true,” contradicted Jupiter.

“Of course it’s true! The best example is the thing with the invisible ink pens! When I told you I always carry one with me in case of emergency, you made fun of me. And? Who was right? Without my invisible message, you would have been lost.”

“That’s what I mean!” Jupiter demanded. “You are so mercilessly arrogant and self-righteous! I am merely reacting to your behaviour towards me.”

“That’s nonsense,” Jelena quipped. “If you weren’t so condescending to me, I’d be nicer to you too. But you’re so arrogant, you’re so scared, you’re afraid.”

Now it was Jupiter who laughed. “What should I be afraid of? You, for instance?”

“There you go again!” cried Jelena. “There was that arrogant undertone again.”

“There was no undertone. You hear what you want to hear. I asked objectively what I should be afraid of.”

“First of all, it wasn’t businesslike, and secondly, in front of me, you’re scared of me because I’m a girl in a wheelchair. My disability gives you the creeps. You can’t admit that, of course, so you’re distancing yourself from me.”

“That’s nonsense, Jelena,” Jupiter said. “Psychology crap from some women’s magazine.”

“And you are afraid of me because I am your equal,” she continued unmoved. “For I am as intelligent as you. At least. And you can’t handle that. I’m not surprised. Your only two friends are inferior to you intellectually.”

“Leave Pete and Bob out of it!” Jupiter quipped. “They have absolutely nothing to do with our fight!”

“I just want you to know that I’m not like them. You can’t push me around.”

“So you think nothing is more important to me than bossing someone around. On the contrary!” Jupiter argued. “You’re the one who’s always trying to take over. The whole silly story with your invisible ink served only one purpose—to break us. You wanted to make it clear from the start who’s in charge... and you wonder why I don’t play the game and stick my neck out?”

“I’m just defending myself against your arrogance,” Jelena claimed.

“Oh yeah? In fact, you are more arrogant!”

“Is that so? No wonder I can’t stand you!”

“I can’t stand you as well!”

Jelena smiled. “My papa is much stronger than your uncle!”

“I can make bigger ice creams than you!” Jupiter retaliated.

“Mine tastes better!”

“And I earn more money than you!” Jupiter snapped.

“So what? I have more money than you! Besides, I can play the violin!”

“And I can play chess!”

“Me too!”

“But I’m much better than you!” Jupiter didn’t want to smile, but he couldn’t help it. He lowered his eyes so as not to look Jelena in the eye. “A few days ago Bob said something I wanted to kill him for.”

“What?”

“He said the reason you and I can’t stand each other is because we’re so alike.”

“This is the very last thing,” Jelena exclaimed with feigned indignation.

“Isn’t it?” Jupiter asked.

“Where could he get such an absurd idea?”

“Completely far-fetched,” Jupiter said.

“Not completely.”

Jupiter sighed. “Now that we’ve cleared that up, maybe we should start thinking about how to get out of here.”

17. In the House of the Culprit

“This is where the traitor lives,” said Dr Arroway sombrely as she slowed her car down. They got out of the car and walked slowly towards Janet’s house. By now it was evening, and the street lay deserted in the dark.

“I have a somewhat queasy feeling,” Pete confessed. “If only Jupe were here! I wonder why he hasn’t come.”

“Probably Aunt Mathilda was not back in time,” Bob surmised. Then he turned to Dr Arroway, who slowed down as they approached the door. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I really want to talk to Janet.”

“Why not?” Bob asked.

“There’s still a chance we might be wrong,” Dr Arroway said.

“I don’t know,” Bob doubted. “After all, we found files in your computer that were named ‘Melody’. That’s hardly a coincidence.”

Dr Arroway didn’t seem to listen to him at all. “I just can’t believe I put my faith in the wrong person for years.”

“Let’s go inside, Dr Arroway,” Bob said. “Then you’ll know for sure.” He took the last few steps to the door and rang the bell.

A moment later, Janet opened the door. “Pete and Bob! Dr Arroway!” she exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here? Is there any news about the *Popol Vuh*?”

“Indeed,” Bob replied and pushed his way into the house past Janet. “May I?”

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“You wanted to hear the news about the *Popol Vuh*? I have a better suggestion—I’ll look for the book!” Bob walked down the corridor, opened every door and took a look in the rooms behind.

“You are out of your mind!” Janet rebelled. “Dr Arroway, what is the meaning of this?”

“Hopefully nothing,” she replied without a sound.

“Hey! Get away from that door! Behind it is my... my bedroom!” Janet angrily approached Bob, but before she could reach him, Bob opened the door.

He gave off an astonished whistle. “Well, I guess we got what we came for.”

He entered the room and returned a moment later with a triumphant smile. Certain of victory, he held a book in his hands—the *Popol Vuh*. “I guess that’s all the proof we need.”

For a moment, there was a dead silence.

“There... there must be some mistake!” Janet affirmed. “I don’t know how—”

“You’re a bad liar,” Dr Arroway interrupted her grimly.

Janet flinched imperceptibly.

“How dare you! You’ve been abusing me for years!” Dr Arroway shouted at Janet.

“Did you really think you could take all the credit for finding the burial site in Guatemala, Dr Arroway?” Janet hissed. Her façade had collapsed. Now she had a glint of hatred in her eyes.

“That’s never been my concern, Janet, and you know it,” she defended herself. “All I wanted was to explore Maya culture, while you were only after money and fame!”

“You might want to continue this discussion when the police are here,” Bob suggested. “I’m sure they’ll listen to you with interest.” He was looking for the phone. “Could I use your phone?”

“Forget it!” hissed Janet, spun around and ran down the corridor.

“Pete! She’s getting away!” Bob cried.

The Second Investigator started to sprint, but at that moment, a door flew open and Janet ran into it with full force. She moaned for a moment, then staggered and fell to the floor. She lay motionless.

“Knock-out in the first round,” Jupiter said solemnly and appeared behind the door.

“Jupe!” cried Pete. “What are you doing here?”

“Surprised?”

“You bet. How... how did you...” Pete started to say.

“Hey!” a voice behind the door called out. “What’s going on up there? Can someone help me up the stairs? And then I’d like my wheelchair back! And a cup of hot tea!”

18. The Last Puzzle

Two days later, The Three Investigators and Jelena were invited to Dr Arrowway's house. They were served Manzanilla tea and home-made bread according to an old Maya recipe. They enjoyed it while reviewing the events of the last days.

"So Janet has worked for you from the beginning only to get information about the Maya art treasures," Pete said. "And on behalf of a group of shady art dealers who would rather have other people work for them than get their hands dirty."

Dr Arrowway nodded. "Unfortunately, there will be no evidence of these art dealers. They have done nothing wrong."

"All they did was to legally hire Janet to get the Maya artefacts for them," Jupiter agreed. "Janet was clever enough to put herself in the service of the famous Maya researcher Dr Lou Ann Arrowway to obtain first-hand information that she would never have obtained otherwise."

"Palmer Dixon was from the beginning only her henchman, whom she needed to keep up the swindle as long as possible." He shook his head. "The audacity of sending those e-mails to Dixon directly from your house! Unbelievable!"

Dr Arrowway nodded. "And I never noticed anything. But then came the *Popol Vuh*. Janet had noticed that I suspected some form of a hidden message in the sacred book. So she was particularly anxious to get her hands on it."

"Of course, she wanted to discover the cemetery herself and make a lot of money with it. But at the auction, I outbid Palmer Dixon because I went higher than I originally planned. And so Janet hired him to steal the *Popol Vuh*. To make sure he carried out the assignment faithfully, she offered him a huge sum of money. Finally, she knew that because of the hidden message, the *Popol Vuh* was worth much more than the price I had paid."

"Why did she wait so long to steal it?" Pete asked. "After all, you've had the book for several weeks."

“Very simple. I spent weeks researching and experimenting how to reveal the invisible message. Janet monitored my attempts every day. She waited until I was beginning to make progress. I’ve done quite a bit of work for her.”

“Then why didn’t she steal the book herself from the beginning?” the Second Investigator asked further.

“It was too risky for her. She wanted it to look like a real burglary and for the police to follow real leads—which, if in doubt, would have led to Palmer Dixon, not her.”

“But then I got in her way,” Jelena said. “By overhearing the phone conversation, she was forced to act. She knew that we would ambush Dixon the following night. So she beat him to the punch and took a risk to steal the *Popol Vuh* herself.”

“Since she has a key to my house because of work, it was no problem for her,” Dr Arroway added.

Bob sighed and leaned back in his armchair. “A complicated story! But now all the mysteries are solved. Thank goodness!”

“Well, not really,” Jelena said. “The main mystery remains, because although we have found the *Popol Vuh* again, the hidden message is still invisible. Have you made any progress, Dr Arroway?”

The cultural historians laughed. “No, unfortunately not. I’ve had enough to deal with in the last two days, making statements to the police and overcoming the shock that my long-time colleague has betrayed me. There was no time to work on the hidden message.”

“What if...” Jelena began, clearing her throat embarrassed. “What would you say if I helped you? I’ve been experimenting a lot with invisible inks lately. I think that you can benefit from my experience.”

“Now you’re talking like Jupiter!” grinned Pete.

Dr Arroway nodded with a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“And when you have made the hidden message visible and you know where the Maya cemetery is, then we will all go on an expedition to the highlands of Guatemala together,” Bob exclaimed enthusiastically. “The Three Investigators could be famous discoverers!”

“Before you all burst into euphoria, I have one more question,” said Dr Arroway. “One thing you haven’t told me yet, Jupiter and Jelena. Janet had locked you in the basement! How did you manage to open the door from the inside?”

The two looked at each other with a grin and remained silent.

“Exactly, Jupe, you haven’t let us in on this secret either!” Pete remembered.

“Very simple,” Jupiter claimed. “Teamwork!”

“Teamwork?” Bob asked incredulously and looked from one to the other. “You two?”

Jelena smiled. “Quite so.”

“Could you be more specific?” Bob probed further.

“Aaaa...” Jelena began and bent over conspiratorially. “Well, how about this—I’ll give you a puzzle and you have to find the solution. You can ask me questions, but I only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. So here it is...

“Jelena and Jupiter are locked in a basement. There is a bolt on the outside of the door. How do they manage to escape?”